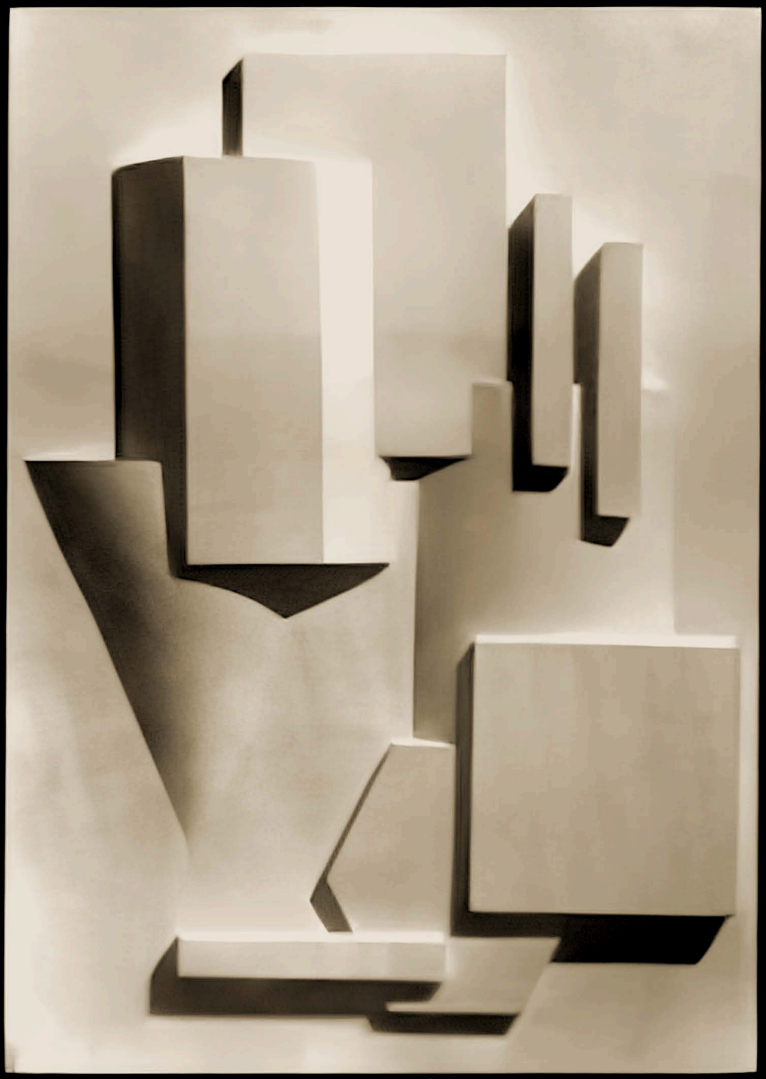
# NIHILISM



FRANCO VOLPI

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HERITAGE

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*Chapter One*

# "ITINERARIUM MENTIS IN NIHILUM". FOR A HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT AND THE PROBLEM

Contemporary man is in a situation of uncertainty and precariousness. His condition is similar to that of a wayfarer who has walked on an icy surface for a long time, but who with the thaw feels that the ice floe is moving and breaking into a thousand slabs. The surface of traditional values and concepts is shattered and the continuation of the journey is difficult.

Philosophical thought has tried to offer a diagnosis of this situation, of the ills that afflict contemporary man and the perils that threaten him. And it has believed it can identify the essential cause of this in 'nihilism'. But what is nihilism?

As a term, nihilism made its appearance as early as the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries in the controversies that characterised the birth of German idealism; later, in the second half of the last century, it became a general topic of discussion, but only emerged as a problem, in all its virulence and magnitude, in the thought of the 20th century. As an expression of artistic, literary and philosophical attempts to experience the power of the negative and to live with its consequences, it brought to the surface the deep malaise that cuts like a crack through the self-understanding of our time. Nietzsche already apo strated it as 'the most disturbing' of all guests. In the meantime, this sinister guest now wanders everywhere around the house and there is no longer any point in trying to put him at the door. But what does one's own nihilism mean?

We find the answer to our question in Nietzsche, the first great prophet and theorist of nihilism. In a fragment written in

the last years of lucidity, asking himself the question, Nietzsche answers:

*Nihilism:* the end is missing; the answer to the "why?" is missing; what does nihilism mean? - *that supreme values are devalued* (VIII, II, 12).

Nihilism is thus the situation of disorientation that arises once the traditional references, i.e. the ideals and values that represented the answer to 'why' and as such illuminated man's actions, have disappeared. In another fragment, Nietz sche further illustrates the dynamic that triggers the devaluation of supreme values and causes the advent of nihilism:

Modern man now experimentally believes in this or that *value,* only to drop it; the circle of values that have been surpassed and dropped is ever widening; the *emptiness* and *poverty of values is* increasingly felt; the movement is unstoppable – although great attempts have been made to slow it down. Eventually man dares a critique of values in general; *he recognises* their origin; he *knows* enough not to believe in any values any more; here is *pathos,* the new brivi do … What I am telling is the story of the next two centuries ... (VIII, II, 266).

Meanwhile, Nietzsche's prophecy has been confirmed. The fire he ignited is now blazing everywhere. Anyone can see that nihilism is no longer merely the bleak experiment of extravagant intellectual avant-gardes, but is now part of the very air we breathe. Its ubiquitous and multiform presence imposes it on our consideration with an evidence that is only matched by the difficulty of embracing it in a clear and unambiguous definition. On the diagnosis of ni chilism, on the anamnesis of the pathologies and cultural malaise it presents, minds are divided. Historical investigations into the genesis of the term have also brought to light the traces of a com plete and ramified manifestation of the phenomenon.

As a first definition would have it in deference to etymology, nihilism – from *nihil,* nothing – is thought obsessed with nothingness. If this were the case, one might be tempted to find nihilism and its tracings almost everywhere in the history of Western philosophy, at least in every thought in which nothingness is set up as a central problem – with good grace from Bergson, who counted it among the pseudo-questions.

In this sense, Gorgias could be considered the first nihilist in Western history because of the lightning-fast inference from him: nothing is; even if it were, it would not be knowable; and even if it were, it would not be knowable.

if knowable, would not be communicable *(anhermèneuton).* This being the case, one wonders whether a history of nihilism should not also include Fridugisus of Tours, the pupil of Alcuin who, in *De sub stantia nihili et tenebrarum*, with a philosophical gesture that was scandalous for the times, wished to show that nothingness imposes itself with a presence of its own and that it therefore has a being and a substantiality of its own. And would not the meditations in which Meister Eckhart, with a vertiginous *annihilation*, declares that God and nothingness, "the angel, the fly and the soul" are one and the same thing – as in the commentary on Luke's saying: "Paul rose from the ground and, with his eyes open, saw nothingness" - rightfully belong to such a story? And why not with him other sublime expressions of speculative mysticism, from Dionysius the Areopagite to John of the Cross and Angelo Silesius?

So why not Charles de Bovelles who, at the height of the Renaissance, in his *Liber de m'bilo* (1509), rambles on about that "original negation of creatures and matter" that is nothingness, employing it as a cardinal concept in his negative theology? Or even Leo nardo, who in a note in *the Codex Atlanticus* (folio 389 *verse* d) an notes: 'Infralle cose grandi che infra noi si trovano, l'essere del nulla è grandissima'? Or the bible of nihilistic scepticism, Francisco Sanches' *Quod nihil scitur*? And why not Leibniz with the famous do manda formulated in *Principes de la Nature et de la Gràce:* "Pourquoy il y a plustòt quelque chose que rien?" and with the even more astonishing answer: "Car le rien est plus simple et plus facil que quelque chose" (Leibniz, 1875-90: VI, 602 )? And finally, why not that sublime master of nothingness that was Leopardi with his thesis noted in the *Zibaldone* that "the principle of things, and of God himself, is nothingness" (Leo pardi, 1 937-49: III, 903)?

Like an irrepressible shadow, nothingness has always haunted and troubled philosophical reflection – like Mephistopheles his Faust. The 'spirit that always denies' insinuates itself into the thoughts that animate the human mind, taking up the reasons for negativity that were already Anaximander's:

> *. . . denn alles, was entsteht,*
> *Ist wert, da/5 es zu Grunde geht;*
> *Drum besser wiir's, da/5 nichts entstiinde*.*

-"... for everything that is born I is such that. it perishes; I therefore it would be better if nothing were born>> (Goethe, Faurt, I, vv. 1339-1341).

Nor can philosophy exempt itself from thinking nothingness if it is true that, in order to fulfil its proper task, i.e. questioning being as being, it must demarcate it from its essential opposition, i.e. nothingness. This is the reason for the drastic conclusion reached by Heidegger in this regard: 'The hardest, but also least misleading touchstone for assessing the genuine character and strength of a philosopher is whether he immediately and fundamentally experiences, in the being of being, the closeness of nothingness. He to whom this experience remains precluded stands definitively and hopelessly outside philosophy' (Heidegger, 1994: 382).

Having said this, a restriction must immediately be made on the field of enquiry into which we will move in our reconstruction of nihilism. Leaving aside the philosophical problem of nothingness and its history (cf. Givone, 1995 ), we will limit ourselves to nihilism in the strict sense as it emerged within philosophical thought, as a concept and as a problem, in the last century and then especially in the 20th century. Our perlu stions – which complement other studies (in particular Verra, 1 979; Vercellone, 1992) and develop an earlier synopsis (Volpi, 1995c)

- They follow the *history of the concept and the problem* as their guiding principle. We hold towards nihilism the same conviction that applies to all true philosophical problems: they have no solution but history.

*Chapter Two*

## TURGENEV AND ITS ALLEGED PAT ERNITY

The first thing to ap$_p$ ure in a historical reconstruction of nichili smo is its birth. It is generally accepted that the two
founding fathers and great theorisers of nihilism were Do stoevskij and Nietzsche. To them belong respectively the literary and the more properly philosophical strands of the movement. The term, however, had already been coined before them. But when and by whom?

It was Turgenev who first claimed authorship. In truth, on the basis of lexicographical investigations we now know that it is a more presumed than actual authorship. But let us first see what he himself makes clear.

In an autobiographical retrospective, Turgenev states that it was he, in his novel *Fathers and Sons ( Otcy i deti,* 1862), who invented the term 'nihilist'. By this term he actually defines the way of thinking of the protagonist of his novel, Bazarov, and that he actually wanted to give substance in this character to a type of man and attitude, both theoretical and practical, that was imposing itself on the historical reality of his time. The central motif of the novel - the events of which take place in 1859 Russia, i.e. two years before the abolition of serfdom and the liberation of the peasantry - is the conflict between the generation of fathers, inspired by traditional humanist ideals, and the rebellious, materialistic and illusory generation of sons. Bazarov, who belongs to the latter, is a young middle-aged man visiting a friend who receives him on his farm at the pre-nuptial of his father and uncle. He first expresses disappointment and then condemnation at the idle way of life of these people, who are indifferent and deaf to what is happening in society. The noblemen wonder whether Ba-

zarov is not a dangerous 'denier' of existing values and social order, a 'nihilist'. And Bazarov gladly accepts this appellation: he declares that he does indeed want to deny the inveterate order and with it the principles and values of the old generation living in an opulent in difference to what happens to the people. Being a nihilist, however, means for him not only destroying the old, but also committing himself to his chosen social task, that of a doctor (he will die of an infection contracted while treating a sick person). Bazarov is - as Turgenev defines him - the 'new man', the 'hero of our time' who has passed through the hard school of work and sacrifice, destined to replace the tired and feeble nobility. He knows he must deny, he knows that in order to advance he must trample on traditional beliefs and values, and he proceeds undaunted without too much concern for the ashes and destruction he leaves behind him. 'Nihilist' is the appellation that suits him.

In the fifth and final chapter of his *Memoirs of Literature and Life* Turgenev remembers his choice:

> As a starting point for the main figure, Bazarov, I had taken the personality, which had struck me, of a young provincial doctor (who died shortly before 1860). In this singular man was summed up, in my eyes, that set of principles that later received the name of nihilism (Turgenev, 1992: 186; 1993: 277-78).

As for the effects that the literary representation of the phenomenon produced, it is still Turgenev who offers us the most effective illustration:

> I will not dwell on the impression made by this story; I will only say that when I returned to Petersburg, on the same day as the famous burning of the Apraksinsky Dvor [the city's great market buildings], the word 'nihilist' was already on thousands of mouths, and the first exclamation I heard on the lips of the first acquaintance I came across by the Neva [the main thoroughfare of Petersburg] was: 'Look what *your* nihilists are doing! They are burning Petersburg!' (Turgenev, 1992: 1 87-88; 1993: 278-79).

In short, the novel provokes, albeit for the purpose of condemnation and retribution, a reading of nihilism that is more radical than that of the author himself - as the shrewd observation of a reader Turgenev reports suggests, and which probably hits the mark:

> 'Neither *fathers* nor sons', a witty lady told me after reading my li bro. 'That is the true title of your tale; and you yourself are a nihilist' (Turgenev, 1992: 195; 1993 : 283 ).

What these observers wanted, and which further sharpened their sensitivity to the phenomenon of nihilism, was to stem the movement of ideas that this term denoted and stop the social disruption it had initiated.

The word I created, 'nihilist', was then used by many others who were only waiting for an opportunity, a pretext to halt the movement by which Russian society was dragged along. Not in the sense of a reproach, not for the purpose of mortification did I use that word, but as a precise and exact expression of a real, historical fact; it was transformed into an instrument of denunciation, of unappealable condemnation, almost into a mark of infamy (Tur genev, 1992: 198; 1993: 284-85).

As soon as it was created, the term 'nihilist' thus got out of hand of its avowed inventor and spread like a category of so cial criticism. But how was the term 'nihilist' defined in *Fathers* and *Sons?* It is worth rereading the precise point in the novel where Turgenev introduces it and specifies its meaning.

"A nihilist," proffered Nikolai Petrovich. "It comes from the Latin *nihil,* nothing, as far as I can judge; so this word indicates a man, who … who admits nothing?"

'Say rather: which respects nothing,' resumed Pavel Petrovich …

"Who considers everything from a critical point of view," observed Arkadij.

"And is it not the same?" asked Pavel Petrovich.

"No, it is not the same. The nihilist is a man who does not bow before any authority, who does not put his faith in any principle, whatever respect that principle is surrounded by'.

"And does that sound good?" interrupted Pavel Petrovich.

"According to whom, uncle. For some it is good, and for some it is very bad'.

"Oh, just like that? Well, I see that this is not our game. We are people of the old century, we believe that without 'prensip' (Pavel Petro vic pronounced this word softly, in the French manner, Arkadij, on the other hand, pronounced 'principii', trailing off the final syllable) without 'prensip', accepted, as you say, by dogma, one cannot move a step, one cannot draw a breath … What do you call yourselves?"

"Nihilists," proffered Arkadij distinctly.

"Yes, first t h e r e were the Hegelians, now there are the nihilists. We shall see how he nets existence in the vacuum, in airless space..." (Turgenev, 1991: 809- 10).

In these few lines is condensed the tension that animates Turgenev's narration and generates the rift between the old and new

vision of the world, that of the fathers, anchored in the old principles, and that of the sons, who are no longer capable of cultivating a faith. It is not said that Turgenev's definition really hits the mark. Probably, as the many protests and corrections it provoked testify, the new generation of children was anything but indifferent to principles. Only they were now other: they were those of the new positivist and materialist worldview. But whatever the case, in fact Turgenev's definition was effective in capturing an ongoing trend in Russian culture and society.

Moreover, the term nihilism had already been used before, both elsewhere and in Russia itself. For example, as early as 1829, the romantic cri tician N.I. Nade:idin, in an article entitled I:*adunata dei nichilisti (Somnifée nigilistov),* had defined those who know nothing and understand nothing as nihilists. And M. N. Katkov had also used the epithet 'nihilists' to criticise the contributors to the journal 'The Contem porary' as people who believe in nothing. Turgenev should, however, be credited, if not the authorship, with popularising the term.

*Chapter Three*

# NIHILISM, ROMANTICISM, IDEALISM

Without prejudice to Turgenev's merit in having put the idea of nihilism into circulation and turned it into a problem felt on a large scale, it has to be said that he was unaware of the term's more ancient origin. Apart from its use in Russian culture itself, the word had already made its appearance elsewhere. In the literature Turgenev might have been familiar with, we find it, for example, in the title of a short story by Karl Ferdinand Gutzkow *(Die Nihilisten*, 1853), a successful German novelist and playwright, an exponent of the 'Young Germany' movement, who had polemically confronted Scho penhauer on the question of the writer's social commitment.

Thanks to investigations into conceptual history (Arendt, 1974; Riedel 1978), we now know that the origin of the concept of nihilism goes back much further. Quite apart from the unattested use that Augustine is said to have made of it by referring to non-believers as *nihilists*, the appearance of the term, in the variant *nihilianismus*, is documented in Gualtiero di San Vittore. The latter uses it to designate the Christological eras according to which, since the divine *illogos* is eternal and uncreated, humanity belongs to Christ only as an accident. If, on the other hand, we strictly adhere to the form *nihilismus,* it first appears in 1733 in the title of F.L. Goetzius's treatise *De nonismo et nihilismo in theologia* (cf. Miiller-Lauter, 1984: 846). But beyond these isolated occurrences, an earlier, more general use of the word has been identified in the French culture of the Revolution. In this historical text the attribute 'nihilist' was employed to qualify the ranks of those who were 'neither for nor against the Revolution'.

The

Transferring this meaning to the level of religious convictions, Anacharsis Cloots - a member of the National Convention who was later guillotined – stated that 'the Republic of the Rights of Man is neither theist nor atheist, it is nihilist' (27 December 1793).

However, beyond lexical occurrences, what is of interest here is the actual philosophical use of the concept. With regard to the general historical philosophical premises that make this possible, a lengthy discourse should be made on the emergence of nihilism before the term itself was born. It should be shown, in particular, how modern co smology with its conception of nature as *res extensa,* i.e. mere empty space and matter, caused man's me taphysical disorientation. At the beginning of the New Age, a chilling observation by Pasca! gives the measure of what a profound transformation materialistic co smology has caused in man's metaphysical position in the universe. 'Drowned in the infinite immensity of the spaces that I ignore and that ignore me,' Pasca! - I frighten myself' (Pa sca!, 1 962: 94 ). This worried lament signals that man's spiritual situation is changing with the new cosmology. In the physical universe of modern cosmology, he can no longer dwell and feel at home as in the ancient and medieval cosmos. The universe is now perceived as extraneous to his individual destiny: it appears to him as an anxious cell in which his soul feels imprisoned, or as a bewildering infinity that disquiets him. Faced with the eternal silence of the
stars and infinite spaces that are indifferent to him, man is alone with himself. He is without a homeland.

By naming the metaphysical bewilderment of modern man in such clear terms, Pasca!'s annotation already touches on the deepest reason for the emergence of nihilism well in advance, at the threshold of the modern age. When meaning is missing, when there is no answer to the
"why?", nihilism is now at the doorstep. This disturbing guest – as Nietzsche put it - has already crept into the ca sa in such a way that no one will be able to drive it out. Of course Pasca! fronts and thinks about this new condition in order to counter it: behind the irrefragable necessity of nature, there is still an *absconditus Deus* who governs it and who governs us, even if He is not immediately re cognizable in His creation. Man is, yes, a fragment of nature, a nothingness crushed by cosmic forces, but he can, insofar as he thinks and creates, subtract his contingency from the conditioning of nature's laws and proclaim himself a citizen of the other world, that of the spirit.

But the scenario is now set. Soon even God will eclipse himself. At first only by hypothesis: everything is to be imagined "as if God were not there

was' *(etiamsi Deus non daretur)* . Then for real: everything must be rethought, first and foremost the meaning of our existence, taking note of the fact that 'God is dead'. Then, when transcendence loses its binding force and falls silent, man abandoned to himself reclaims his freedom. Indeed, he has no choice but to take it: man is freedom itself because he is now no more than what he plans to be, and everything is allowed to him. That this freedom is a desperate freedom, which infuses more anguish than fullness of being, is a fact t h a t existentialism has tried to live with.

The speculative horizon to which these few lines allude, and which develops in a nihilistic crescendo along the historical arc from Pascal to contemporary existentialism, makes it possible to frame the first occurrences of the term nihilism and the very genesis of the movement in a less restricted context than that to which a simple lexicographic or conceptual-historical investigation is limited. In this horizon, one can better understand the first real philosophical use of the con cept, identified towards the end of the 18th century in the context of the con troversies characterising t h e birth of idealism.

In idealism's opposition to realism and dogmatism, the term 'nihilism' is used to characterise the philosophical operation by which idealism intends to 'annul' the object of common sense in order to show how it is in truth nothing more than the product of an invisible and unconscious activity of the subject. Depending on the point of view, favourable or unfavourable to such an operation, the term acquires a positive or negative sense. Ni chilism then means, in the positive sense, the philosophical destruction of all presuppositions; in the negative sense, on the other hand, the destruction of the evidence and certainties of common sense by idealistic speculation.

It is precisely in this second sense that Jacobi accuses the idea of lism of being nihilism, thus first introducing the term
with a philosophical valence. The most famous passage, usually referred to as the first occurrence of the term in its speculative sense, is contained in a letter from Jacobi to Fichte written in March and published in the autumn of 1799. Jacobi states:

> Truly, my dear Fichte, it should not bother you if you, or anyone else, want to call *chimerism* that which I contrast with idealism, which I reproach with *nihilism* (Jacobi, 1972: 245; cf. also 223 ).

This use of the concept is not occasional, since Ja cobi also employs it in other places. He uses it for example in the

Jacobi wrote *On divine things and their revelation ( Von den gottlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung,* 18 1 1 ), in the first part of which, in which he recalls the term, he reworks and inserts a review of the works of Matthias Claudius planned in 17 98 (thus before the missive to Fichte) and then withdrawn because of *the Atheismusstreit* of 1799. Jacobi describes as 'nihilism)), but also as 'atheism)), the way in which God is brought into the consideration of philosophy, from Spinoza to Fichte to Schelling: He becomes the object of argumentation, i.e. of discursive, dialectical, rational knowledge, and ceases to be the pure and simple Asoluto which only a direct intuitive grasp can reach. For Jacobi, this grasping is the proper function of *Vernunft*, i.e. reason, understood, according to the etymology of the term already emphasised by Leibniz and Herder, as *Vernehmen* (to perceive), i.e. as the perception of the Absolute. Hence the reduction of reason to a kind of immediate contact with the Absolute, i.e. to a 'faith)) *(Glaube)*-reduction that characterises Jacobi's philosophical position and that will be severely attacked by the idealists, in particular by Hegel. As for the sources from which Jacobi might have drawn the term 'nihilism', the hypothesis that can be advanced is that
he had heard it used in the French cultural environment where it was already circulating, albeit with a different meaning. It was also mo
layer that Jacobi was familiar with the German continuation of Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* by Johann Andreas Cramer, dated 17 86, in which it was declared that theologians who used the con cept of "nothing)) to distinguish the divinity of Christ from his humanity were guilty of the "heresy of Nihilanism)) (Baum, 1969).

That the term came into circulation in Germany at that time, perhaps even as a 'fundamental term in the discussion of ideali smo' (Poggeler in Arendt, 1974: 310), is evidenced by the circumstance that a widespread reference work such as Wilhelm Traugott Krug's *Portable Universe Dictionary of the Philosophical Sciences (Allgemeines Handworterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, 1828) dedicates a special headword to it, expressly added in the supplementary volume. But the main confirmation comes from lexical research that has documented the use of the term in other Romantic thinkers, even before Jacobi's missive to Fichte. For example Daniel]enisch
-an otherwise almost unknown author, who was close to Hamann and had dealings with Kant, and ended up committing suicide in the Spree -employs it repeatedly in his treatise *On the Foundations and Value of the Discoveries of the Pro/ Kant in Metaphysics, Morals and Aesthetics (Uber Grund und Wert der Entdeckungen des Herrn Professar Kant in der Metaphysik, Mora! und*

*Asthetik*, 1796), submitted to the Prussian Academy's competition on the progress of metaphysics. In answering the famous question of "what real progress has been made in metaphysics in Germany since the time of Leibniz and Wolff", Jenisch contrasts Spinozism, i.e. dogmatism and realism, with the new position that emerged with Kant, i.e. dealism, and sets out to illustrate – as the title of the author's letter to Kant, published as an appendix to the paper, states - "the favourable and unfavourable effects of critical philosophy that have occurred so far". A proponent of a 'relative realism' *( Verhiiltnis-Realismus),* Jenisch interprets Kant's dealism not in an absolute sense, but in a critical sense, i.e. as transcendental idealism: since our intellect is not 'ar chetypical' but 'ectypical', i.e. finite, the thing itself cannot be eli minated. That is, there remains a hard resistance of being that does not allow itself to be absorbed and resolved entirely in thought. Now, despite the fact that the nullification of the thing in itself appears to our reason and imagination as a monstrous and terrible hypothesis, this hypothesis has nevertheless been widely practised by more recent philosophy, which has stretched and developed idealism in the absolute sense. But in doing so, it has ended up denying the reality of things, i.e. by annihilating into the abyss of unreality, amidst the 'lethic waves of eternal nothingness', the whole of nature with the myriad beings and creatures that teem in the universe. If they were to be interpreted in this way, idealism and criticism 'would predi cate *the most manifest atheism* and *nihilism'* (cf. Poggeler in Arendt, 1 974: 335 ff.; Riedel, 1 978: 380).

More or less at the same time asJacobi, in some cases before other well-known authors such as Friedrich Schlegel and Jean Paul also use the term. The former even several times and with different meanings. For instance, in a note of 1797 Schlegel notes that 'every witticism ten de al nihilismo'. The occurrence of the term in this fragment is not easy to contextualise or interpret. Schlegel is probably referring to the corrosive function of wit *( Witz),* i.e. of irony: it produces a shift in perspective and a detachment from the finite, it suspends and destroys its claims to absolute worth, and in this sense tends towards that 'nihilism' which, by questioning the finite and relativising it, opens the way towards the infinite, i.e. towards the true Asso luto. A use of the term in clear reference toJa cobi's polemic with Fichte can be found in the university courses held by Schlegel between 1804 and 1806. Here is what he observes in this regard:

> Although idealism and realism stand in an absolute antithesis to each other, it is nevertheless very easy to jump from one extreme to the other. Both lead

easily to nihilism (...).should not nihilism constitute its own determinate system? (Schlegel, 1837: 475; cf. also 428, 486).

Schlegel uses the term 'nihilism' in yet another sense, to characterise the Eastern worldview. He says that nihilism is the mystical oriental form of pantheism (Schlegel, 1963: 27, 573, 575) – an equation, this one, that is also found later in Feuerbach's Es *without Christianity.*

While in Schlegel the meaning of the term fluctuates and changes in the different phases of his thought, Jean Paul instead makes a very precise and defined use of it. Creator, not by chance, of the character of Roquairol *(Titan,* 1800-01), one of the most significant figures of the nihilist in German literature, Jean Paul criticises in *Clavis Fichtiana seu Leibgeberiana* (1800), dedicated to Jacobi, and then in an entire chapter of the *Propedeutica all'estetica (Vorschule der Asthetzk,* 1804), those whom he calls the 'poetic nihilists', that is, the Romantics. They only see art and not nature: intoxicated by their ego, profoundly 'selfish', they only celebrate the free play of the imagination, i.e. the spontaneous activity of the creator ego, forgetting the non-ego, all of nature, the entire universe, including God, which they end up annihilating. But when, almost like a setting sun, God too disappears and vanishes for an epoch, then the whole world enters into darkness (Jean Paul, 1959: V, 31). Atheism breaks up the whole universe into a myriad of isolated selves, without unity and connection, in which each stands alone before that Nothingness at whose co

even Christ, at the end of time, despairs of the existence of God the father. It is the disconcerting apocalyptic vision that Jean Paul imagines twice. First in *Shakespeare's Lamentations of the dead, among the dead listening to him in church, on the non-existence of God (Des toten Shake spear's Klage unter den toten Zuhorern in der Kirche, daft kein Gott sei,* 1789). Engaging in a literary description of his experience of Nothingness, Jean Paul imagines a voice proclaiming from the altar:

> There is neither God nor time. Eternity only broods itself and gnaws at chaos. The rainbow of beings arches sunless over the abyss and dissolves drop by drop - we witness the mute burial of Nature on the cida and are buried with her. Who ever lifts his gaze to an eye of Nature's wine? She gazes into it with an empty, black orbit (Jean Paul, 1959: Il, n, 590-91).

A second time in the famous *Discourse of the Dead Christ, from above the universe, on the non-existence of God (Rede des toten Christus, vom*

*Weltgebà'ude herab, dafi kein Gott sei,* 1796 ), included in the novel *Sie benkà "s* and made known by Madame de Stael who translated it into French in *De l'Allemagne*. Here Jean Paul perfects and radicalises his bold vision of absolute Nothingness:

> Nothing still and mute! Cold, eternal necessity! Foolish chance! Do you know what you dominate? When will you tear down the building and me? - Chance, do you know what you do when you advance with your hurricanes in the sleet of the stars, extinguishing one sun after another with your breath, and when the luminous dew of the constellations ceases to sparkle at your passing? - How lonely each one is in the immense tomb of the universe! Beside me there is only me – O father! where is thy infinite bosom, that I may rest upon it? (Jean Paul, 1 977: 30).

In the Nothingness, the fixed point on which the idealists based their *annihilatio mundi*, namely the self, also ends up sinking.

> If each self is its own father and creator,' Jean Paul wonders, 'why can it not also be its own exterminating angel? (Jean Paul, 1977: 30).

It is no coincidence that in the work whose radical and caustic irony is considered by many to be the culmination of Romantic nihilism, *Bonaventure's Nocturnes (Nachtwachen des Bonaventura,* 1804), the anonymous author takes up the same nihilistic motif as Jean Paul in the episode of the Wandering Jew, without diluting it in the dream frame as the latter does. The whole piece of writing is a grappling with Nothingness, and the profession of nihilism made in the eighth nocturne could not be bleaker:

> The skull never deserts the mask that it gazes upon, life is but the rattlesnake that the Nothing wears to tinkle before tearing it off. What is the All? Nothing but Nothingness: it chokes itself, and down it voraciously swallows itself: this is what the perfidious charlatanism is reduced to, according to which something exists! For if only once the choking were to pause, the Nothing would leap out in the eyes of men to horrify them; fools call this pausing *eternity*! - but no, it is precisely Nothingness instead, absolute death – for life consists only in uninterrupted dying (Bo naventura, 1984: 77-78; 1990: 1 87 ).

And in the close of the writing, the self-destructive challenge to Nothingness is once again launched:

I want to gaze furiously into the Nothingness and become affrighted with it, so that I will no longer experience human remnants when it finally gherminates me!

With you, old alchemist, I would like to set out; only, you don't have to beg to get heaven - don't beg – rather expel it, if you have the strength( … ) stop begging; I'll forcefully untie your hands! Alas! What is this – you too are but a mask and you deceive me? I no longer see you, Father - where are you? At the touch of my fingers everything is reduced to ashes and on his lo there remains nothing but a handful of dust, while a couple of satol worms sneak away( ... ). I scatter this handful of fatherly dust in the air, and what remains – Nothing!

Opposite, on the grave, the visionary still lingers and embraces Nothingness! And the echo in the ossuary calls for the last time - "Nothing!"( Bonaventura, 1990: 319, 323; 1984: 143-45).

These elements may suffice to give an idea of the suggestive con text in which the Romantics deal with the problem of 'nihilism'. But even more significant from a philosophical point of view is the fact that the term is employed in a technical sense by none other than the young Schelling and Hegel. Whilst Schelling takes note of the controversy between Cobi and Fichte and rejects the accusation that he himself is a nihilist, Hegel asserts the necessity of transcendental nihilism as a methodical procedure of philosophy. In the essay *Faith and Knowledge (Glauben und Wissen,* 1802), published in the "Kritisches Jour nal der Philosophie", the journal he edited together with Schelling, He gel takes a position on the controversy between Jacobi and Fichte and criticises them both, together with Kant, as dualists. The main argument put forward against them is that they remain stuck in a basic dichotomy, as they fail to completely resolve being in thought. In this context, Hegel asserts – against Jacobi – that Fichte's 'nihilism of transcendental philosophy' is an inevitable methodological step, but at the same time – against Fichte – that his nihilism is merely relative and incapable of reaching that pure thought in which the opposition to being is overcome. "The 'first task of philosophy', the 'task of nihilism', is to arrive at 'the knowledge of *absolute* nothingness', i.e. to arrive at the 'fulfilment of true nothingness' – where it should be noted that unlike in the *Science of Logic ( Wissenschaft der Logik,* 18 12) here it is nothingness, not being, that serves as the starting point in the beginning of philosophy (Hegel, 1 98 1: 231). Questa prima tematizzazione del nulla è lo sfondo sul quale Hegel svilupperà successivamente la diagnosi nichilistica del- la transizione al mondo moderno in termini di «morte di Dio», «atei- smo», «fatalismo», «pessimismo», «egoismo», «atomismo», e dichiar-

he need for the dialectic to go through negativity and 'nihilism', i.e. the 'feeling that God is dead', while recognising it as a simple moment in the life of the spirit that must be overcome.

That even a thinker as important as Hegel employs the term 'nihilism' in philosophical terms, even if only in the early phase of his thought, is an extremely significant episode for the reconstruction of the history of the concept and the problem. Later on, especially through the critical confrontation with Schelling, the problem of the
'Nothingness' and 'negativity', together with the use of the related terms, underwent a considerable transformation in Hegel.

As far as the further presence of the concept within idealism is concerned, as evidence of the non-occasional nature of its use, it must be said that it is also found in other minor exponents of the movement, such as Karl Rosenkranz, Christian Weisse and Immanuel H. Fichte, with different emphases from time to time. But the further one moves away from the original controversy over the genesis of idealism, the more the meaning of the term shifts from the strictly philosophical-speculative sphere to the social and political sphere, i.e. to the consequences generated by the assumption, on the part of a privileged subject, of an attitude of radical annihilation of everything that delimits his actions. The fi gure of the 'nihilist' makes its appearance as a free thinker who demolishes every assumption, every prejudice, every given condition, and thus also every traditional value, and thus prefigures the traits of the anarcho-libertarian nihilist who will live his most intense season in the last d e c a d e s of the 19th century.

*Chapter Four*

## NIHILISM IN THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SENSE AND ITS FRENCH ORIGIN

The new meaning of the concept, used to describe a state of society to be overcome, can be found in the work of the only great romantic thinker of Catholic confession, namely Franz von Baader. Rather than from the idealistic-romantic discussions, Baader took the concept of nihilism from French culture, especially from Joseph de Maistre, and employed it in two writings: in the article *On Catholicism and Protestantism (Uber Katholicismus und Protestantismus,* 1 824) and in the academic lecture *On the Freedom of Intelligence (Uber die Freiheit der Intelligenz*, 1 826).

In the first text, Baader argues that Protestantism has given rise to a "scientific, destructive nihilism" on the one hand and a "non-scientific, separatist pietism (mysticism)" on the other. The task of Catholicism is to combat both tendencies, especially the former, by restoring "the concept of authority in the ecclesiastical, political and scientific sense against any doubts or protests, whether anecdotal or new" (Baader, 1 851: 76). Nihilism is here identified with the dissolution of 'sacred truths', i.e. with the destruction of traditional orders and rules in their social cohesive function. The cause of such nihilism is identified in the controlled exercise of the rationality of science.

In the academic prolusion of 1 826, this meaning of the term is further specified. Nihilism' is defined here as an 'abuse of intelligence that is destructive to religion' and is associated with 'obscurantism', i.e. the 'equally reprehensible inhibition of its use stemming partly from a fear of knowledge, partly from the di-

scorn of knowledge' (Baader, 1 85 1: 149). Nihilism and obscurantism, considered respectively as consequences of the too free or too inhibited use of reason, are both stigmatised as symptoms of degeneration and disintegration of religious, social and civil life. In this text too, Baader believes that action must be taken against the 'nihilistic' tendencies in society, and that the force capable of countering them is Catholicism: it must organise itself, seeking to overcome them through a reconciliation of science and religion.

Concerned about the same disruptive effects of nihilism is Juan Donoso Cortés. In his *Ensayo sobre el catolicismo, el libe ralismo y el socialismo* (1851) he accuses the French socialists, especially Proudhon, of nihilism. From the point of view of this prince of anti-revolutionary conservatives, nihilism is but one of the many perverse forms in which rationalism, i.e. the Enlightenment, manifests itself:

"Deism, pantheism, humanitarianism, Manichaeism, fatalism, scepticism, atheism" (C .Jnoso Cortés, 1972: 254 ). It is to be opposed and combated as it leads to the denial of divine and human government (Donoso Cortés, 1972: 357).

The use of the term 'nihilism' as a category of social analysis and criticism in these authors hostile to the Enlightenment and the Revolution comes to light. But the word had already been used in this sense, from the end of the 18th century onwards, in the French linguistic area, where it is probable that Jacobi, having stayed in Paris several times, had already had the opportunity to transpose it. In the culture of the Revolution, the appellation of

'Nihilist' had been used to refer to the ranks of those who were 'neither for nor against the Revolution'. As mentioned, Ana charsis Cloots – a member of the Convention – had stated in a speech on 27 December 1793 that 'the Republic of Human Rights is neither theist nor atheist, it is nihilist'.

And it was precisely in the France of the Enlightenment and Revolution that a thought was born, that of the Marquis de Sade, which presents itself as one of the most radical forms of atheistic and materialistic nihilism. In his novels, as well as in his two philosophical dialogues *(Dialogue entre un prétre et un moribond,* 1782 and La *Philosophie dans le boudoir*, 1795 ), Sade imaginatively stages all the corrosive and harmful consequences that his nihilistic view of Nature and Reason has for custom and society. From the very beginning, i.e. already in the re-presentation of the dying man to the priest in the dialogue of the same name, his nihilism is formulated as a metaphysical consequence of a consistent materialistic rationalism:

What system, my friend? That of nothingness. It has never frightened me and I do not see anything in it that is not simple and consoling. All other systems are the work of pride, that alone is the work of reason. Besides, it is neither hateful nor absolute; have I not the perpetual generations and regenerations of nature in view? Nothing perishes, my friend, nothing is destroyed in the world ( … ) How can you claim the goodness of your so-called God with such a system? (Sade, 1 976: 20).

Irrespective of a precise knowledge of these and other occurences of the concept and the problem, it was already clear at the time that just as the Re volution, so 'nihilism' was a phenomenon of French origin. This is emphasised by the already mentioned Wilhelm Traugott Krug in his *Dizio narzo manuale delle scienze filosofiche.* First of all, he gives this definition of nihilism:

*Nihil est* – nothing is - is a self-destructing statement that has also been called nihilism. For if nothing were, one could not even af stop nothing (Krug, 1969: III, 63 ).

And in a supplement to the work he notes:

In French, one is also called a 'nihiliste' who in society, and particularly in bourgeois society, has no importance (which is only number, but has no weight and no value), and likewise in religious matters believes in nothing. Such social or political and religious nihilists are far more numerous than philosophical or metaphysical ni chilists who want to annihilate everything that is (Krug, 1969: V, n, 83 ).

The source that Krug probably draws on in his reference to French linguistic usage is Louis-Sébastien Mercier's work *Néologie ou Vocabulaire de mots nouveaux* (1 801 ), in which 'nihili ste' or 'rienniste' is defined as one 'qui ne croit à rien, qui ne s'intéres se à rien'.

'Riennisme' as a term to designate the attitude of asso lute lack of belief – in contrast to the different beliefs, sects and vi sions of the world – is also incidentally used by Joseph de Maistre in his *Correspondance diplomatique* from St. Petersburg (1 811 -1 7). De Maistre laments the fact that all sects, even 'nihilism', are allowed in Russia, while Catholicism is not tolerated.

And to add another famous name to our reconnaissance of the concept's history, we may recall that Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly would also speak explicitly of 'nihilism' later on. In

*Les prophètes du passé* (1 851 ) he links the nihilistic phenomenon to the egological subjectivism of Cartesian philosophy that lies at the origins of modernity. The seemingly incontrovertible foundation of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* - taken up, developed and taken to the extreme in all its variations by modern philosophy – is in reality a very puny foundation, it is that shaky foothold that can par ticulate the mind of man understood as *ego.* The outcome of this can only be a 'nihilism incapable of any response' (cf. Hofer, 1 969).

In the German linguistic area, the term nihilism continued to be used in a social and political sense with a negative value even after the revolution of 1848. This was the case in the anonymous work *Eritis si eu! Deus* (1 854), a novel in three volumes, in which Hegelism is regarded as the root and cause of nihilism, especially social and political nihilism. One thinks, evidently, of the conse guences reached in the radical circles of left-wing Hegelism. This is the case with Karl F. Gutzkow, author of the aforementioned collection *The Nihilists* and the novel *The Knights of the Spirit (Die Ritter vom Geiste,* 1 849-50), which also looks at the revolution with a certain sympathy. The 'nihilists' are for him sophists who criticise the old without knowing how to create the new, they are the 'philosophers of absolute nothingness', the 'Liebigs of the invisible world', in the sense that, as in chemistry, they dissolve everything.

*Chapter Five*

# THE GROUNDLESS NIHILISM OF MAX STIRNER

The first authentic theorisation of a philosophical position that can be defined as nihilism, albeit without the use of con cept, occurs with Max Stirner. His capital work *Lunico e la sua pro prietà (Der Einzige und sein Eigentum,* 1 844) is the most rab bious and corrosive expression of the left-wing radicalism that arose as a reaction to he gelism. Advocating the reasons for an anarchic-libertarian revolt pushed to the extreme, Stirner rails against any attempt to assign the life of the individual a meaning that transcends it and claims to represent its needs, requirements, rights and even image. And he calls the undefinable entity that I myself am 'the One', just as in the same years Kierkegaard – also against Hegel – called it 'the Individual'.

A prince of modern iconoclasts, Stirner intends to dismantle every philosophical system, every abstraction, every idea - God, but also Hegel's Spirit or Feuerbach's Man – that arrogates to itself the impossible task of expressing the 'unspeakability' of the One. It knows that this is not an object of thought and will not tolerate usurpers of its inalienable right to self-determination. In this sense, at the beginning of his work, he sets as an emblem the thesis that supports the entire speculative self-assertion of the One: "I have founded my cause on nothing". Not 'on Nothing' *(aufdas Nichts),* but precisely 'on nothing' *(au/ nichts):* this means that the resulting nihilism is not based on a philosophical affirmation of Nothing, but is simply the negation and rejection of any foundation that transcends the original and unrepeatable existence of the individual.

This is the underlying motif of the entire work, from beginning to end. It begins with the peremptory declaration of the unpropriability of the Unico:

God and humanity have founded their cause on nothing, on nothing other than themselves. In the same way I then ground my cause on *myself,* I who, in God's presence, am *the* nothingness of all others, who am my everything, I who am the only one ( ... ) I am not nothingness in the sense of emptiness, but the creator nothingness, the nothingness from which I myself, as creator, create everything (Stirner, 1979: 13).

And after having ridden this motif for pages and pages, the work closes with *the categorical* rejection of any task, mission or ideal with which the One identifies himself, that is, he annihilates himself as one. To the point of rejecting any name that claims to be its own name:

It is said of God: 'No name can name you'. This is true for me: no *con cept* expresses me, nothing that is indicated as my essence exhausts me: they are only names ( ... ) The *owner of* my power is myself, and I am so in the moment that I know I am *unique. In* the *unique, the* owner himself re-enters his creative nothingness, from which he was born. Every being superior to myself, be it God or man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness and pales as soon as the sun shines on this awareness of mine. If I base my cause on me, the only one, it rests on the ephemeral, mortal self-creator who consumes himself, and I can say: I have founded my cause on nothing (Stimer, 1979: 380-81).

The blasphemous tenor of Stirnerian rejection of any foundation is clear when one considers that the expression 'I have founded my cause on nothing' was introduced by Goethe in the poem *Vanitas! Vanita tum vanitas!* by reversing the title of an ecclesiastical hymn by Johannes Pappus (1549- 1610) which reads: 'I have entrusted my cause to God' *(Ieh hab' mein' Sach' Gott heimgestellt).*

But the ultimate outcome this nomadic thinker arrives at is discussed in a letter to which Cari Schmitt drew attention:

He expressed his ultimate drive in a letter in which he says: we will then become again like the animals of the forest and the wild flowers. This is the true nostalgia of this invaded ego. This is the new paradise. This is na ture and natural law, the elimination of self-alienation and self-extraction in an untroubled corporeity. The Adamic bliss of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* that Hieronymus Bosch cast in white nudity on a table. But forest animals and wild flowers are added to it. The flight of mosceri ni in the sunbeam. The utterly natural nature and natural law of the deepest spheres of telluric existence. The utterly carefree chirping of Rossini's magpie. The pure identity with oneself in the sense of happiness of a blissfully accelerated blood circulation (Schmitt, 1987: 84).

If ever in his proud isolation the One can have points of support for his return to nature, they lie in the only two truths he recognises: 'my power' and the 'splendid egoism of the stars'. A very contagious profession of faith, which aroused spirits and immediately provoked scandalised reactions. It was no coincidence that *in the German Ideology*, Marx and Engels devoted over three hundred pages of criticism *to the One.* But the eccentricity and marginalisation of the Self-king ensured that the anarchic-individualistic disease was isolated for the time being. A few decades - let us say: from then on
- it would quickly and unstoppably spread. Only *at po stern*, then, did Stirner find a space and a place in the history of nihilism.

*Chapter Six*

# NIHILISM, ANARCHISM, POPULISM IN RUSSIAN THOUGHT

In the Russian thought of the last decades of the 19th century, nihilism became a general phenomenon that permeated the cultural atmosphere of the entire era. What pushed it in this direction was, among other factors, the circumstance that the term, having become the designation of a movement of social and ideological rebellion, emerged from the sphere of philosophical discussions and grafted itself directly into the fabric of society, acting on anarchic and libertarian components, and setting in motion a vast process of transformation (cf. Masaryk, 1971; Venturi, 1972).

The theorists of Russian nihilism engaged in an anti-romantic and anti-metaphysical revolt of 'sons against fathers', contesting existing authority and order and especially attacking the values of traditional religion, metaphysics and aesthetics, considered as 'nothingness', as illusions destined to dissolve. The Russian nihilist movement was often more dogmatic and rebellious than critical and sceptical, convinced as it was of the imperative to deny at all costs, of the need to proceed in any case, no matter if amidst ruins and shattering. He therefore disowned the past, condemned the present, but without the ability to open himself up to a concrete and positive configuration of the future. What he extolled was the sense of individuality, the utilitarian coldness, neither cynical nor indifferent, but radical and consistent in supporting the revolt of *the intelligenczja* against the dominant power and culture. Decisive for the preparation and dissemination of nihilism was the work of the aforementioned Turgenev, who put the concept into circulation, and the activity of a host of other intellectuals among whom the two

who died in their early thirties: Nikolai A. Do broljubov (1 836- 1861) and Dmitry I. Pisarev (1840- 1866). The former was a contributor to the magazine 'The Contemporary)) and with his criticism of Goncarov's *Oblomov* (1 856), who represented the passive and conservative nobility, he became an advocate of a democratic and progressivist radicalism, which he intended to support by means of literature and ro mance. (He inspired Lukacs with his critical realism and Marxist aesthetics). Pisarev, a critic par excellence of the ideal of art as an end in itself *(Razrusenie estetiki,* 1865: *The Destruction of Aesthetics),* took nihilism to its extreme consequences, dropping all remnants of anthropologism or moralism, and accepted in a positive sense the appellation of 'nihilist') popularised by Turgenev *(Bazarov,* 1862).

- But the mastermind of the nihilists of the 1960s was Nikolai G. Cemysevsky, a scholar of economics and advocate of strict mate rialism. His novel of social agitation *Che /are? (Cto delat',* 1863), written in prison, was a great success with the public and is to be regarded as one of the main manifestos of Russian nihilism. In it, the new forms of life based on the abolition of conventions and traditions, on a communitarianism that banished all possessive feelings, on the emancipation of women, and on dedication to the cause of the people were described.

However, the nihilistic movement of the 1960s soon had its head cut off. Dobroljubov and Pisarev died prematurely, Cernysevsky was imprisoned at the age of thirty-four, in 1862, and only regained his freedom shortly before his death in 1888. This did not, however, prevent the nihilist ideas from spreading rapidly and inflaming Russian Jewry. But without any concrete successes: throughout the successful decade there were large-scale trials with mass convictions and deportations. In the general escalation of social contrasts, the 'People's Will' *(Narodnaja Volja*) movement was born, which argued that the overthrow of the symbol of power, i.e. the killing of the Tsar, was the first concrete action to be taken in order to initiate the desired changes. After a series of attacks, Tsar Alexander II fell under the bombs of the *narodnovoliki* on April 1881. In the course of the extremely harsh repression, an extremist, Sergei G. Necaev, author of a *Catechism of the Revolutionary (Katechizis revoljucionera)* whose theses are distinguished by the ruthless sense of organisation put at the service of faith in the revolution, was captured. The expression 'necaevism)) was then used to designate the most unscrupulous and intransigent forms of political ni chilism – a radical way of conceiving revolutionary action, that of Necaev, which was rejected by Aleksandr I. Herzen and con-

divided by Michail A. Bakunin. Some even believe that the latter was the inspiration and co-author of the *Catechism.*

These two thinkers effectively embody opposite ways of conceiving the nihilistic-revolutionary worldview: radical and rebellious extremism in Bakunin, moderation and concreteness in Herzen. Bakunin proclaimed himself the 'founder of nihilism and apostle of anar chia>> and declared:

> Pour vaincre !es ennemis du prolétariat il nous faut détruire, encore dé truire et toujours détruire. Car! l'esprit *destructeur* est en meme temps l'esprit *constructeur* (cf. Wittkopf, 1974: 83 ).

Bakunin thus glorified the moment of negativity, which he took from left-wing Hegelianism and considered a 'terrible ram', the expression of the force of the spirit that annihilates and destroys. And he radicalised nihilism in an explosive combination of anarchist, socialist, utopian-libertarian ideas.

As for Herzen, he directed the strides of his criticism against the 'Buddhists of science' who lingered in contemplation in an age that called for action. Opposed to all conservatism, he was the main theorist of populism, but, opposing Necaev's terror and Bakunin's rebellionism, he conducted his battles with the moderation that came from his love of culture and history, as is evident from his letters *to an old comrade (K staromu tova rifcu)* and the essays dictated in German *on the other side (Vom anderen U/er,* 1 850; the Russian edition is from 1 855). In this way, he was able to articulate a differentiated view of nihilism and saw in it the logic of transformation, hailing it as a positive phenomenon:

> Nihilism is logic without strictures, it is science without dogma, it is the unconditional obedience to experience and the humble acceptance of all con- sequences, whatever they may be, if they arise from observation, if they are demanded by reason. Nihilism does not turn *something* into nothing, but reveals that *nothing,* mistaken for *something,* is an optical illusion and that any truth, however much it contradicts fantastic representations, is healthier than these and in any case obligatory.
>
> Whether this name is appropriate or not, it does not matter. We have b e c o m e accustomed to it, it is accepted by friend and foe alike, it has become a marker for the police, it has become a delusion, an offence for some, praise for others (Herzen, 1977: 3 1 ).

But he also saw the dangers that nihilism concealed and assessed it with a critical eye:

Of course, if by *nihilism* we mean reverse creation, i.e. the transformation of facts and ideas into *nothingness,* into sterile scepticism, into haughty 'sitting on their hands', in despair leading to inaction, then the true *nihilists* least of all will fall under this definition and one of the greatest nihilists will be I. Turgenev, who cast the first stone against them, and perhaps his favourite philosopher Schopenhauer (. . .). When Bakunin sma- sched the Berlin professors and the Parisian revolutionaries of 1 848, accusing the former of timidity and the latter of conservatism, he was a perfect *nihilist* ( … ). When the *petrasevcy* went to forced labour because they 'wanted to ab beat all human and divine laws and destroy the foundations of society' ( … ) he was *a nihilist* (Herzen, 1977: 31 -32).

That is why he countered the abyss that nihilism had opened with an awareness of the limits within which the phenomenon had manifested itself:

Nihilism has since expanded, has become clearer in its self-consciousness, has partly become a doctrine, has taken much of science into itself, and has aroused men of action with enormous strengths and enormous talents ( … ) all this is indisputable. *But it has not brought about any new principals* (Herzen, 1977: 32).

The scenario of nihilism opens up in all its breadth and depth in Dostoevsky's work. A universal writer, destined to influence not only Russia but the whole of European literature, Dostoevsky fleshes out the existential figures and situations of his novels – especially *Crime and Punishment (Prestuplenie i nakazanie,* 1863 ), *The Demons (Besy,* 1 873) and *1/ The Karamazov Brothers (Brat'ja Karamazovy,* 1 879- 80) – to philosophical insights and motifs that anticipate decisive experiences of twentieth-century thought, first and foremost that of atheism and ni chilism. In him, the phenomenon of the dissolution of values, experienced as a crisis that consumes the Russian soul, unfolds before our eyes in all its nefarious consequences, even to the point of crime and perversion. And although the ultimate aim of his exhibition of evil is t o instruct its indictment, the literary fortune of his work actually favours the spread of the nihilist disease, helping to undermine inveterate certainties and corrupt established orders. Among the sugge stive characters in his novels, which represent so many examples of how Dostoevsky was able to develop the theme of nihilism, declining it in all its varieties and representing it in con crete figures, may be mentioned here:

1) Raskolnikov, the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment,* for whom the unconditional re vindication of his freedom becomes a philosophical-moral problem with endless tribulations;

2) In *Demons*, there is the 'black angel' Stavrogin – whose real historical model is Bakunin – a nihilist with a luciferous and depraved intelligence who corrodes and destroys everything, without being able to transform his de moniacal will into productive creativity; and then the atheist Kirillov who, blindly following the rigid thread of logic, deduces from his hypothesis ('If God were not …') the lawfulness of all amo ral behaviour and, in the end, kills himself to prove the non-existence of God;

3) In The *Brothers Karamazov*, the character of lvan, a subtle atheist to whom Dostoevsky puts the terrible tale of the Grand Inquisitor-King into his mouth to illustrate the laceration between the ideals of Christianity, which reach for heaven and 'would like to go empty-handed' on earth, and the realism of this world over which Evil is sovereign, 'the spirit of self-destruction and non-being' (Dostoevsky, 1984: Il, 845; cf. Hessen, 1 980) .

Important for the philosophical understanding of nihilism is the fact that Dostoevsky's glimpse into the nihilist scenario – notwithstanding his 'great wrath' and his categorical condemnation of the phenomenon in the name of a regeneration of ideals according to the evangelical spirit – found an enthusiastic observer in Nietzsche, and that the combination of their influence in Europe gave a decisive imprint to the literature and spiritual atmosphere of the first decades of the 20th century (cf. Schubart, 1 939; Sestov, 1950).

*Chapter Seven*

# NIHILISM AND DECADENCE IN NIETZSCHE

It is in Nietzsche's work – especially in the fragments of the 1980s published posthumously in the dubious and controversial compilation *The Will to Power (Der Wille zur Macht)* in a first edition in 1901 and in a second, more than doubled, edition in 1906 – that nihilism becomes the subject of explicit philosophical reflection. With him, the analysis of the phenomenon reaches its culmination, maturing a historical awareness of its more distant roots, in Platonism and Christianity, while at the same time nurturing the critical need to overcome the evils that have proliferated in it. It is therefore not hyperbole to consider Nietzsche as the greatest prophet and theorist of nihilism, as the one who diagnosed the 'disease' that was to afflict the world at an early stage and for which he offered a therapy. But by which route did Nietzsche arrive at the problem of nihilism?

The term is found used for the first time in the notes of the summer of 1880, but Nietzsche had long since recognised and identified, following the motif of the 'death of God', the distinctive traits of the phenomena. Seen as a capital problem, it became the thematic axis around which his final, exhausting research revolved. This tends to be taken into account in the distribution of the fragments proposed by the editors *of The Will to Power,* whose first book, of the four into which the work is divided, has as its theme 'European Nihilism'.

Decisive for the constitution of the horizon of thought in which Nietzsche developed a sensitivity to the problem was his youthful reading of Schopenhauer and some exponents of the school of pessimism, in particular Eduard von Hartmann, Julius Bahnsen and Philipp Mainlander (cf. Miiller-Seyfarth, 1 993 ; lnvernizzi, 1 994 ). As for

Schopenhauer, his importance in Nietzsche's formation is well known and has been the subject of numerous investigations. Without the metaphysical horizon that opens up with the Schopenhauerian conception of the Will, both Nietzsche and Wagner would be unthinkable, as would all that they represented for German culture. Relative to our problem, it would be necessary to show to what extent the Schopenhauerian thematisation of Nothingness, even in the absence of the concept of 'nihilism', influenced the reception of this phenomenon in Nietzsche. In any case, Nietzsche considers Schopenhauerian pessimism and the yearning for Nothingness that it nurtures as a form of "passive nihilism>>, i.e. as a weakening of the power of the spirit. The same applies to Eduard von Hartmann's philosophy of the unconscious, to Julius Bahnsen's 'pessimism of contradiction', who qualifies his own philosophy as 'nihilismm>> and defines man as 'a self-conscious Nothingness', creating the neologism *Nihilenz* in analogy to *Existenz* (Bahnsen, 1 93 1: 161 -62) - and for Philipp Mainlander's 'metaphysics of entropy>> – which understands the creation of the world and evolution as a kind of 'self-cadaverisation of God>>. These are all motives and references that converge in the intellectual experience in which Nietzsche formed his own understanding of nihilism.

Of course, from a historical point of view, one should not forget the focus on the phenomenon that developed in those years throughout Europe following the attacks in Russia, which led the press and the public to equate nihilism and terrorism. But the next occasion that led Nietzsche to intensively deal with the phenomenon, influencing his understanding of it, was the reading, in addition to Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, of two authors in particular: Paul Bourget and Dostoevskij.

As far as Dostoevsky is concerned, the influence that the reading of his works had on Nietzsche and the structural analogies traceable in the literary and speculative experiences of the two would require a separate investigation in order to be sufficiently illustrated. Beyond the reference to the classical studies already mentioned (Schubart, 1939; Sestov, 1950), it suffices here to recall that Nietzsche himself, in a letter to Overbeck dated 23 February 1887, recounts his own discovery of Dostoevsky in the midst of his feverish work on the planned *Will to Power:*

> A few weeks ago I did not even know his name, as an uncultured person who does not read 'magazines'! A visit to a bookstore accidentally put me in front of my eyes*! Esprit souterrain,* his work that had just been translated into French (and equally

I discovered Schopenhauer at 21 and Stendhal at 35 by chance!). The instinct of affinity (or what shall I call it?) made itself felt immediately, my joy was extraordinary... (Nietzsche, 1986: VIII, 27).

Less well known, however, is the influence that reading Paul Bourget (1 852-1 93 5) had on him. In the history of French literature, this otherwise little-known writer enjoys a certain notoriety as a novelist and literary critic. His novels were hailed as seismographs of the incipient literary modernity, despite the attacks of conservative critics such as Ferdinand Brunetière. The most successful of them was *Le Disciple* (1889). The protagonist is a young student who is initiated into philosophy by a teacher, Adrien Sixte, from whom one recognises the figure of Taine, with whom Bourget had trained but from whom he distanced himself with this novel.

As a literary critic, Bourget gained notoriety thanks to a series of articles in which he effectively described the salient features of turn-of-the-century literature, using as categories for the analysis of the society of the time concepts that would make his fortune such as 'deca dence', 'pessimism', 'cosmopolitanism' and 'nihilism'. The articles appeared between 15 December 1881 and l0 October 1885, under the title *Psy chologie contemporaine – Notes et Portraits,* in the 'Nouvelle Revue' founded by Juliette Adam in 1 879 and edited and promoted by her for a ven tennium in her Parisian salon. In 1883 Bourget collected the articles on Baudelaire, Renan, Flaubert, Taine and Stendhal under the title *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1 883 ) into a book, and in 1885 he followed this up with a second volume: *Nouveaux Essais de psychologie contemporaine,* comprising articles on Dumas the son, Lecomte de Lisle, the Gon court brothers, Turgenev and Amiel.

Literary criticism, which Bourget practises using what he calls the 'psychological method', describes the transition from late French romanticism to modernity and sees the trends in decadent literature as a reflection of transformations affecting the whole of society. The *Essais* constitute a lucid analysis of 'some of the fatal consequences of cosmopolitan life' (Bourget, 1 993 : 439) and illustrate the processes of decadence and decomposition of the so cial fabric as they were manifesting themselves in the literature of the time. Bourget gravitates his 'psychological' analysis of decadence around certain capital themes, motifs and questions.

1) A first area is the aesthetic one. Bourget wonders about some fundamental questions: what are the function and place of ar t in the process of social transformation? What is the role of the artist in

in the face of the process of societal decomposition that characterises modern cosmopolitan life? Can the artist, with respect to the egua litarian tendencies that impose themselves everywhere, maintain the aristocratic primacy that comes from his awareness of his task as experimenter and creator?

2) A second set of questions revolves around the moral perspective: is it possible, as well as describing, to make an assessment of the de cadence of contemporary society? But does not admitting the possibility of such a judgement mean introducing a moral perspective?

3) What, then, is the attitude to take towards the de-composition of society and the decay of its vital forces? What to do in the face of the 'disease of the will', i.e. the inability to tame, by virtue of a principle, the contradiction emerging from physiological drives? Bourget considers the viewpoint of the moralist and the politician, who produce 'reactions' to the forces of decadence, to be legitimate, but believes that only another viewpoint, the 'psychological' one, is capable of seeing decadence in a positive light and grasping the 'aesthetic values' it expresses – a motif, too, echoed in Nietzsche.

What made Bourget's *Essais* especially famous were the four pages at the end of the essay on Baudelaire, the first in the series, entitled 'Théorie de la décadence' (Bourget, 1 993: 13-18). Through a disenchanted analysis Bourget recognises in the pessimism and Ni chilism of his contemporary literature the 'evil of the century' (Bourget, 1993: 438) and declares that, to take the illness seriously, one must admit that there are no remedies to counter it and that, therefore, one must accept it together with the aesthetic values it produces (Bourget, 1993: 442). This is best understood if one keeps in mind what Bourget means by 'décadence'.

The term has two similar meanings for him: one refers to society, the other to style and literature. Both society and language can be compared to an organism. Social decadence occurs when the individuals that make up the society make themselves independent and 'the organisms that make up the total organism cease to subordinate their energy to the total energy and the anarchy that is established constitutes the decadence of the whole' (Bourget, 1 993: 14).

From this idea of social decadence Bourget derives by analogy a theory of literary decadence and formulates it in terms that will be taken up, almost verbatim, by Nietzsche:

> An equal law governs the development and decadence of that other orga nism that is language. A decadent style is one in which the unity of the book

decomposes to make way for the independence of the page, the page decom mises to make way for the independence of the sentence and the sentence to make way for the indi pendence of the word (Bourget, 1993 : 14).

It has long been suggested (cf. Weigand, 1893 ; Andler, 1 958: III, 41 8 ff.), and it has been shown with abundant evidence following a line of research indicated by Mazzino Montinari (cf. Kuhn, 1 992; Cam pioni, 1993 ; Volpi, 1 995a), that this theory of decadence found in Nietzsche an attentive and voracious reader. But before turning to Nietzsche, it must be said what consequences Bourget draws from his theses. Well, when faced with decadence he notes the possibility of two attitudes: decadence can be approached from a 'moral-political' perspective or from what he calls a 'psychological' perspective. The first perspective, the one according to which 'politicians and mora lists reason', looks at the overall 'amount of force' that can keep the social organism as a whole functioning and, if it finds that it is lacking or insufficient, it deduces a perspective of decadence and tries to counter it. Opposite to the point of view of the moralist and the politician is the point of view of the 'psychologist': his interest is directed not at the whole, but at individual individualities, and he aims to study their originality, unrepeatability and ineffability with all their most attractive and fascinating features, and the aesthetic values they produce.

By means of this 'psychological' consideration, Bourget opens up an access to the phenomenon of decadence that allows him to valorise its positive effects, i.e. above all the aesthetic values that artistic individuality produces by becoming independent of society. By opening up this access, he is able to make an apologia for the experimental and eccentric existence of the man of letters and the artist: the latter lives only by himself and self-justifies himself, from a 'psychological' point of view, by his intrinsic value, according to the principle of art for art's sake. Bourget presents the aestheticising point of view of decadence as the 'supreme equity' of the spirit and of ideas, because it is able to assap rate and assimilate them all without adhering to any, thus producing 'a richer treasure of human acquisition'.

If the citizens of a decadence are inferior as workers of the country's grandeur, are they not far superior as artists of their soul's interiority? If they are unsuitable for private or public action, is it not because they are too suited to solitary thought? If they are bad reproducers of future gene rations, is it not because the abundance of fine sensations and the exquisiteness of rare sentiments have made them virtuous, sterile but refined,

of voluptuousness and sorrows? If they are incapable of the dedications proper to deep faith, is it not because their over-educated intelligence has freed them from prejudices and because, having made the review of ideas, they have arrived at that supreme equity which legitimises all doctrines to the exclusion of all fanaticism? Certainly, a Germanic chieftain of the 2nd century was more capable of invading the empire than a Roman patrician was capable of defending it; but the erudite and fine, curious and disenchanted Roman, such as the emperor Hadrian, for example, the Cesa king who loved Tivoli, represented a richer treasure of human acquisition (Bourget, 1993: 15).

With this, Bourget counteracts the arguments that have always been made against the view of decadence, i.e. that it would be per tooth and have no future. He neutralises the negative assessment of the phenomenon and shows the reasons why it can be understood in the aesthetic values it produces.

The great argument against decadence is that it has no tomorrow and that there will always be a barbarity that will crush it. But is not the fatal legacy of the exquisite and the rare to be wrong in the face of brutality? One is entitled to confess such a wrong and to prefer the defeat of Athens in decadence to the triumph of the violent Macedonian (Bourget, 1993: 15).

In an analogy, this belief in social and political decadence is also extended to the literatures of decadence.

These literatures do not have a tomorrow either. They result in alterations of vocabulary, in subtleties of words that will make this style unintelligible to generations to come. Fifty years from now, for example, the language of the Goncourt brothers will only be understood by specialists. Who cares? Perhaps the writer's aim is to present himself as a perpetual candidate before the universal suffrage of the centuries? We delight in what you call our stylistic corruptions, and we delight with us the refined of our race and our time. It is a question of whether our exception is not an aristocracy, and whether, in the order of aesthetics, the plurality of suffrages represents nothing but the plurality of ignorances (Bourget, 1993: 16).

The ideal of aesthetic aristocratism that Bourget cultivates and on the basis of which he justifies the ideal of the great artist is evident from these lines. Since there is a reciprocal relationship of action between the individual and society, the individuality that distances itself from the social environment ends up severing its roots in the soil from which it draws its vital energies and runs the risk of perishing and dying. It will then be that only the courageous, strong and mature artist, with a great personality and

creativity, he is able to practise the perspective of decadence and to afirm his individuality independently of society. This is the case with Baudelaire: fatally attracted by the 'phosphorescence of evil' he has the strength and courage to 'proclaim himself decadent)) and to seek
"everything that in life and art to simple natures seemed morose and artificial)) (Bourget, 1993: 16). It is capable of decay and ruin without perishing, producing, on the contrary, imperishable aesthetic values.

Bourget thus sketches out a theory of so cial and literary decadence in which the aristocratic ideal of art has in itself its own justification and meaning. The decadent artist ennobles the scene with his appearance and draws his aesthetic and spiritual nourishment from the manifestations of decadence. Themes, such as these, that ela borated with much more speculative vigour can be found in Nietzsche.

In fact, the motif of decadence, closely connected to that of nihilism, runs through Nietzsche's entire oeuvre and became, after the exploration of French literature and the study of Bourget's *Es sais*, a central theme in the speculation of his later years of lucidity. A condensation of this is the booklet *Nietzsche contra Wagner,* where already in the preface one encounters traces of Bourget's in fluence. Nietzsche declares that it is 'an essay *(Es sai)* for psychologists, *not* for Germans' (VIII, III, 399), evidently alluding to the 'psychological' perspective, as opposed to the moral one, that Bourget had adopted in order to understand decadence from a positive perspective. And in the course of the booklet – in which, as is well known, reflections made elsewhere are included – Nietzsche makes use of the repertoire of motifs on *décadence* gathered through his exploration of French literature following Bourget's 'psychological)) guide.

One motif, in particular, seems to have touched Nietzsche: that according to which *décadence* is characterised by the physical-logical dissolution of the organism and the disintegration of the parts that detach themselves from the whole and become independent of it. Already in a short annotation in the winter of 1883/84, Nietzsche pins down Bourget's central thesis:

> *Style* of *decadence* in Wagner: *the* /single *phrase becomes sovereign,* subordination and co-ordination becomes random. Bourget, p. 25 (VII, 1/2, 313 ) .

In this fragment is contained *in nuce* the theory of decadence that Nietzsche develops in the wake of Bourget and applies to what in his opinion is the manifestation par excellence of decadence, Wagner's music. This application is put forward in a letter to Cari Fuchs in mid-April 1 886, sent from Nice, the

"cosmopolis' in which he was staying. Speaking of the 'decadence *(Verfal[)* of the melodic sense' that he says he perceives in German musicians, and thus of the ever-increasing attention to the individual gesture and the ever-increasing skill in the detail and configuration of the individual moment, Nietzsche writes of Wagner:

> The Wagnerian formula 'infinite melody' expresses in the most lovely way the danger, the corruption of instinct, and also the good faith, the tranquillity of conscience in the midst of such corruption. Rhythmic ambiguity, whereby one no longer knows or *should* no longer know whether a thing is head or tail, is undoubtedly an artistic experiment through which wonderful effects can be achieved - the Tri *stane* is rich in it - but as a symptom of an art, it is and remains the sign of dissolution. The part reigns over the whole, the phrase over the melody, the moment over time (even over musical time), the *pathos over the ethos* (character or style or whatever you want to call it), and finally *the esprit* over 'sense' (Nietzsche, 1986: VII, 176-77 ).

Here, too, although without naming it, Nietzsche traces his own de finition of decadence to that of Bourget. However, a difference in emphasis and evaluation should be noted. Nietzsche is attracted by the phospho rescence that decadence emanates; he knows, however, that it is a light that absorbs but is insufficient to illuminate. He is a child of decadence, ep also struggles and protests against it. If he accepts, therefore, the tendency to disaggregate from the organism to its individual functions, from society to the individual, from the whole to the parts, which Bourget hailed as the germ of a more refined sensibility, it is not simply to suffer it. On the contrary, Nietzsche wants to counter it by means of a 'countermovement' that has its centre of gravity in art as the will to po tence, that is, as creativity and activity and not as passive enjoyment. In the same letter to Carl Fuchs he continues:

> Excuse me! But what I believe I perceive is a change in pro spective: one sees much, too minutely the particular; much, too much goes into the whole. In music, the will is stretched towards this sowering perspective, it is more than the will*!* And this is *décadence*: a word that, among people like us, does not despise but defines (Nietzsche, 1986: 177).

Two years later, in The *Wagner Case,* Nietzsche re-proposes his own theory on decadence in a for but definitive form, taking up from Bourget the analogy between literary decadence and social decadence, between the disintegration of the whole of a text and the dissolution of the whole of society. Only, in spite of the declarations of intent _ *déca dence* is "a word that ( .. ) does not despise but defines" - he does not os-

serves decadence with detached neutrality, but strongly opposes it. This is why, on the one hand, he cannot fail to recognise the reasons for decadence as a phenomenon intrinsic to life itself and the parable of its development, stating in Fragment 14 [75] of Spring 1 888, entitled 'Concept of "decadence"':

> The phenomenon of decadence is just as necessary as any rise and progress of life: it is not in our power to *eliminate it.* Reason, on the contrary, wants to *be given its due* (…) (VIII, III, 46).

On the other hand, however, he holds against Bourget that the extenuation of decadence in individuality does not produce new and more refined aesthetic values, and that it is instead indispensable to regain the life of the whole. Taking up Bourget's description in almost the same terms, Nietzsche reformulates it in such a way as to derive a critical judgement on decadence:

> By what is each *literary décadence* characterised? By the fact that the vi ta no longer resides in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence usurps and blurs the sense of the page, the page takes vi ta at the expense of the whole, – the whole is no longer the whole. But this is the allegory of every style of *décadence:* always atomistic anarchy, disintegration of the will, 'li berty of the individual', or to put it in the language of morality extended to political theory, '*equal* rights for all'. Life, the *equal* vitality, vibration and e suberance of life included in the smallest organisms, and the rest *poor i n* life. Everywhere paralysis, sorrow, stiffening, *or* enmity and chaos: both are more and more apparent the higher the forms of organisation towards which one ascends. The whole does not generally live any more: it is down, calculated, posthumous, an artificial product (VI, III, 22-23 ).

And in a corresponding posthumous fragment he openly names his source:

> This senseless overloading of details, this underlining of piccolos, the mosaic effect: Pau! Bourget (VIII, II, 339).

All this sheds light on the historical context of ideas and experiences in which Nietzsche's theory of decadence is rooted, and shows to what extent it depends on it. On the other hand, however, Nietzsche grafts the motifs he transposes almost verbatim from Bourget onto the broader horizon of his interpretation of nihilism as the logic of western stock. He can thus warn against mistaking the con-

consequences for the causes, from confusing the surface manifestations of decadence for the deep metaphysical reasons that inneeded it. In Fragment 14 [85] from the spring of 1888 he summarises and formulates the intuition that projects him far beyond Bourget:

> Nihilism is not a cause, but only the logic of decadence (VIII, m, 55).

If Bourget is used to diagnose the phenomenon of deca dence, Nietzsche, on the other hand, tries, against Bourget, to penetrate it more deeply in order to hazard a prognosis and prescribe a therapy. Hence his relative distance from Bourget, expressed in letters to Peter Gast (7 March 1887 ), to Taine (4 July 1887 ), and to Malwida von Meysenbug (4 October 1888) (cf. Nietzsche, 1986: VIII, 42, 106, 447). In short, as he writes in the Preface to the *Wagner Case,* if it is true that decadence was the problem that most deeply occupied him, it is also true that he just as resolutely sought to defend himself against it (VI, III, 5). Nietzsche was therefore absolutely right when he proclaimed in *Ec ce homo* that he was a decadent but at the same time also the antithesis of the decadent, that he had learnt 'the art of filigree in taking and understanding in general' and experienced for himself the affi nment that comes from *décadence*, but at the same time that he had the strength for the healthy and robust vision of the whole and for the transvaluation of values:

> With a sick look at healthier concepts and values, or the other way around, from the fullness and security of the *rich* life to the secret workings of the instinct of *décadence* – this has been my longest exercise, my real experience, the only one in which, if ever, I have become a master. Now it is in my hand to *shift perspectives*: *the* first reason why for me alone a 'transvaluation of values' is possible (VI, III, 273 ).

It is clear at this point to what extent Dostoevsky's and Bourget's readings prompt Nietzsche's thought. With these two readings, Nietzsche's thought is brought to maturity by a guiding motif that he had long since grasped in the sentence "God is dead" and that had converged in the diagnosis of the devaluation of supreme values and in the recognition of the dynamics of Western history interpreted as decadence, as the history of Platonism-nihilism. Already in his early years (1870), Nietzsche had found the reason for the 'death of God' in the statement, quoted by Plutarch, that 'the Great Pan is dead'. And he immediately radicalised it:

I believe in the ancient Germanic sentence: all gods must die (VIII, m/1, 121).

It is in *Gaia scienza (Die /rohliche Wissenscha/t,* 1882), in the passage No. 125 entitled 'The Madman', that the death of God is presented as the decisive experience in which the awareness of the vanishing of traditional values is acquired. It is no coincidence that four years later, when he wrote a fifth book for the new edition of the work, Nietzsche began with the same theme:

The greatest recent event – that 'God is dead', that faith in the Christian God has become unacceptable - is already beginning to cast its first om bre on Europe (V, n, 239).

The death of God, i.e. the demise of traditional values, becomes the thread for interpreting Western history as decadence and providing a critical diagnosis of the present. From the discovery of Bour get and Dostoevsky onwards, Nietzsche will increasingly interpret this historical process in terms of 'nihilism'.

But what does 'nihilism' actually mean? In posing the question himself, Nietzsche answers with a dry and precise definition that describes the phenomenon in its essence and indicates its cause:

*Nihilism:* the end is missing; the answer to the "why?" is missing; what does nihilism mean? - *that supreme values are devalued* (VIII, ii, 12).

Nihilism is thus the 'lack of meaning' that arises when the binding force of traditional answers to the 'why?' of life and being is lost, and this occurs along the historical process in the course of which the supreme traditional values that gave answers to that 'why?
"why?" - God, Truth, Good – lose their value and perish, generating the condition of 'meaninglessness' in which contemporary humanity finds itself. Nietzsche writes in one of the fragments drafted for the preface to his planned work The *Will to Power:*

I describe what is to come: the advent o f nihilism ( … ). Modern man experimentally believes now in this or that *value,* only to have it fall away; the circle of values that have been surpassed and allowed to fall away is ever-increasing; the *emptiness* and *poverty of values* is ever more noticeable*;* the movement is unstoppable – although great attempts have been made to slow it down. Eventually, man dares to criticise values in general; he *recognises* their origin; he *knows* enough not to believe in any values any more; this is the *pathos,* the new thrill (… ). What I am counting is the history of the next two centuries ( … ) (VIII, n, 266-65).

And in a remake of the same piece he asks:

Why in fact is the advent of nihilism now *necessary*? Because it is our own previous values that draw their ultimate conclusion in it; because nihilism is a logic thought through to the very end of our great values and ideals – because we must first experience nihilism in order to realise *what the value* of these 'values' really were ( . . . ) (VIII, 11, 393-94).

According to Nietzsche, the process of the devaluation of values is the most profound trait that characterises the unfolding of the history of European thought, which is thus the history of a decadence: the originating act of this decadence is already present in the foundation of the doctrine of the two worlds by Socrates and Plato, i.e. in the postulation of an ideal, transcendent world in itself, which as a true world is superordinate to the sensible world, considered instead as a relative world.

Why is this? Because soon the supersensible world, as ideal, proves to be unattainable, and unattainability means a di fect of being, a diminution of its consistency and value. Ideality, i.e. unattainability, is a 'calumniating force of the world and of man', a 'poisonous breath upon reality', 'the great *seduction that leads to nothingness'* (VIII, II, 265). The devaluation of supreme values, i.e. nihilism, already begins here, i.e. with Platonism, which di stinguishes between two worlds and thus introduces a dichotomy into being. Nihilism, as the history of the postulation and progressive dissolution of the ideal world, is the other side of Platonism and "the nihilist is he who, of the world as it is, judges that it should *not* be and, of the world as it should be, judges that it does not exist" (VIII, II, 26). In a short text included in The *Twilight of the Idols (Gotzendam merung,* 1888) and titled "How the True World Ended Up Becoming Faerie" Nietzsche offers an illuminating compendium of the history of the nihilist lism-platonism in six chapters. Let us look at them concisely.

1. The true world, attainable by the wise, the pious, the virtuous, – *he* lives in it, *he himself is this world* (VI, III, 75).

Nietzsche alludes here to the situation that occurs in the first phase of the history of Platonism-nihilism, i.e. the chapter that corresponds to Plato's thought: the existence of a ve ry, suprasensible world is postulated, which, however, has not yet become a mere 'ideal', 'Platonic' entity, but is attainable by the wise.

2. The true world, for the moment unattainable, but promised to the wise, the pious, the virtuous ("to the sinner who does penance") (VI, 111, 75).

In the second phase of the history of Platonism-nihilism, the rift between the ideal world and the sensible world, between transcendence and imma nce, opens up, since even for the sage, the ideal world is only a promise, therefore unattainable for the time being. Contextually, the sensible world is devalued: earthly existence is de-graded to the realm of appearance, of transience, even if the possibility of one day reaching the real world is envisaged. Human existence takes place in the aldiqua, but is stretched out towards the hereafter – which becomes the object of promise and faith. Platonism becomes Platonism for the people, i.e. Christianity.

3. The true world unattainable, indemonstrable, impromissible, but already as thought a consolation, an obligation, an imperative (VI, m, 75 ).

The third chapter in the history of Platonism-nihilism is the one that corresponds to Kant's thought. The true, supersensible world is excluded from the realm of experience and is thus declared indemonstrable within the limits of theoretical reason alone. However, it is recovered as a postulate by practical reason: although forced into the pale existence of a mere hypothesis, it continues to bind in the form of an im perative.

4. The real world – unreachable? However u n r e a c h e d . And as unreached, also *unknown.* Consequently not even consoling, sal vific, binding: to what could something unknown bind us? (VI, III, 75 ).

With the fourth chapter in the history of Platonism-Nihilism, Nietzsche marks the phase of scepticism and metaphysical disbelief that follows Kantism and idealism, and which can be identified with the incipient positivism. As a consequence of the Kan tian destruction of metaphysical certainties, the belief in the ideal world and its knowability disappears. However, this does not mean that Platoni smo-nihilism itself is already outdated. Once the supra-sensible world is declared absolutely unknowable, it follows that one cannot know anything about it and that, strictly speaking, one can neither decide for it nor against it. It loses the moral-religious relevance it still had as a postulate of practical reason.

5. n 'real world' – an idea that is no longer useful for anything, not even more binding – an idea that has become useless and superfluous, *therefore* a refuted idea: let us abolish it! (VI, III, 75).

In the last two chapters of his compendium, Nietzsche begins to present his own philosophical perspective. This is already revealed by the fact that the term 'real world' is now inverted. In fact, since the 'true world' has been abolished, this term no longer has any value and must therefore be suspended, hence put in inverted commas. Nietzsche is thinking here of his own work of demolition, which with The *Gaiety of Science* has achieved its first result: he is at the beginning, in the phase of morning thought, even if not yet in full noontide. But after the abolition of the supersensible world, as a superfluous hypothesis, two problems remain open: what happens to the place where the ideal stood and which, after its abolition, now remains empty? And what is the meaning of the sensible world after the idea world has been abolished? A further step is needed in which the demolition undertaken is brought to completion.

6. n real world we have abolished it: what world is left? Perhaps the apparent one? (. . . ) But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one* (VI, III, 76).

This last chapter, which also involves the abolition of the apparent mon do, indicates the task Nietzsche sets himself in the last phase of his thought. We are at the "incipit Zarathustra", at the philosophy of the full noontide, at the moment of the shortest shadow in which Platonism
nihilism is truly overcome. But for this to happen, it is necessary to
that the 'apparent world' is also abolished. This does not mean simply getting rid of the sensible world as such. If this were the case, since the ideal world and the sensible world together constitute the totality of being, their abolition would result in nothingness. But Nietzsche cannot want this, if it is true that he aims at an overcoming of nihilism. Abolishing the
"Rather, 'apparent world' means eliminating the way in which the sensible is seen from the perspective of Platonism, i.e. stripping it of its appearance. It is therefore not a question of abolishing the sensible world, but of eliminating the Platonic misunderstanding and thus paving the way for a new conception of the sensible and a new relationship between the sensible and the non-sensible. To this end, it is not enough simply to overthrow the old hierarchy and place at the top what was previously at the bottom, appreciating the

sensible and despising the non-sensible. Instead, one has to get *one's entire mind* out of the horizon of Platonism-nihilism, that is, out of the ontological dichotomy it implies and the related categories.

In a famous fragment entitled 'Critique of Nietzsche's Nihilism' (VIII, II, 256-59), Nietzsche asserts that nihilism necessarily takes over as a psychological state when the great categories with which an organising principle had been introduced into the world and a meaning had been given to becoming are eroded by the suspicion that they were merely fuelled by the unconscious self-delusion that human life uses to survive. These are the categories of 'end', 'unity' and 'truth'.

Whereas once we were under the illusion that becoming had a meaning, a goal – be it the 'moral order of the world', the 'increase of love and harmony)) or the 'approach to a universal state of fe licity)) - with the onset of nihilism 'it is realised that with becoming one aims at *nothing,* attains *nothing ( . . . )* Therefore the delusion about a *pretence of becoming* is a cause of nihilism)) (VIII, II, 256-57). Secondly, the way o f dominating the becoming, which consists in leading it back to a unifying principle, i.e. one that simplifies and controls its complexity by organising it as a unity, also fails. and considering the latter as its final value.

The third major category that falls away with nihilism is that of truth: since in becoming there is neither end nor unity,

There is nothing left *as a loophole* but to condemn this whole world of becoming as an illusion and to invent a world beyond it as the *real* world. But as soon as man realises that this world has only been fabricated on the basis of psychological bi-dreams, and that in no way does he have the right to do so, the last form of nihilism arises, which encapsulates *disbelief for a metaphysical world*
- which forbids itself to believe in a *true* world (VIII, n, 257 -58).

When it becomes clear that "it is not permissible to interpret the ge neral character of existence neither with the concept of *'end', nor* with the concept of *'unity*', nor with the concept of *'truth'" (VIII, II, 258),* one ends up inhibiting every organising principle and every transcendence and admitting as the only reality the world in its eternal flow and becoming: the problem is that the latter appears devoid of sense and value. Hence "one cannot bear this world which one does not want to deny") (VIII, II, 258); "the categories "end", "unity", "being", with which we had introduced a value into the world, are once again *extracted* from it – and now the world appears to be *valueless*") (VIII, II, 258).

1) Nihilism, which imposes itself as a 'psychological state', and which initiates the process of devaluation and dissolution of the supreme transitional values, is nevertheless an *incomplete nihilism*. In it, the di struction of old values begins, but the new ones that take their place occupy the same place as the previous ones, i.e. they retain a supersensible, ideal character. In incomplete nihilism, the distinction between the real and apparent worlds does not disappear completely, and a faith still remains operative. To overthrow the old, one still has to believe in something, in an ideal; one still has a 'need for truth'. In the fe nomenology that Nietzsche presents, incomplete nihilism manifests itself in various areas and forms:

a) In the sphere of scientific knowledge, positivism and the naturalistic, causal and mechanistic explanation of the universe are manifestations of incomplete nihilism; associated with these in the sciences of the spirit is the historiographic positivism of the historical sciences, which finds its philosophical formulation in historicism;

b) In the field of politics, incomplete nihilism manifests itself as nationalism, chauvinism, democraticism, socialism and anar chism (Russian nihilism);

c) Finally, in the artistic sphere, the French naturalism and csteticism are manifestations of nihilism in their entirety.

2) Only with the maturing of what Nietzsche calls the *complete nichtli smo* is the place they occupied, i.e. the true, ideal, supersensible world, destroyed along with the old values.

a) Such *nihilism* is at first a *passive nihilism*, i.e. a sign of "decline and regression of the power of the spirit", incapable of achieving the ends pursued so far. Its manifestation par excellence is the transformation and assimilation of Oriental Buddhism into Western thought, with the cultivation of the yearning for Nothingness, already present in the Romantics but nourished above all by Schoen-Phenhauerian philosophy.

b) Complete nihilism later manifests itself *as active ni chilism*, i.e. as a sign of the 'increased power of the spi rite' which is expressed in promoting and accelerating the process of destruction (VII, n, 12- 13; n. 9 [35]).

Nietzsche calls *extreme* the form of active nihilism that strips away not only traditional values, hence the moral worldview and the truth value itself, but also the supersensible place these values occupied:

The extreme form of nihilism would be the claim that every belief, every holding for true is necessarily false: *because there is no* REAL WORLD. Hence*: a perspectival illusion,* the origin of which is in us *(since* we co nsistently need a restricted, abbreviated, simplified world) (VIII, II, 15).

And again:

That there is no truth; that there is no absolute constitution of things, a 'thing in itself'; – *that itself is nihilism, indeed extreme nihilism* (VIII, II, 13-14).

It is only with the abolition of the ideal place of traditional values that space is made for the possibility of a new position of values. Referring to the fact that in this way extreme nihilism creates space and comes into the open, Nietzsche also speaks of *ecstatic nihilism* (VII, III, 222 ). The negative character inherent in nihilism as such here takes on a positive declination insofar as this nihilism makes possible the new position of values based on the recognition of the will to power as the fundamental character of all that is. By once again opening up the possibility of affirmation, nihilism overcomes its incompleteness and becomes complete; it becomes *classical nihilism*.

*sic.* It is this nihilism that Nietzsche claims as his own when he says he is 'the first perfect nihilist in Europe, who has, however, already experienced nihilism itself to the full – who has it behind him, under him, outside him' (VIII, II, 3 93 ).

Now, to truly bring the nihilistic hypothesis to fruition – as Nietzsche illustrates, among other things, in the great fragment on "The European nihilism" (Lenzer Heide, 10 June 1887), dismembered in the sister edition and restored by Colli-Montinari in its integral form (VIII, I, 199-206; no. 5 [7 1]) – it is necessary for us to "think this thought in its most terrible form: existence, as it is, without meaning or purpose, but inevitably returning, without an end in the nullity of the nihilistic. 5 [7 1]) -it is necessary that we 'think this thought in its most terrible form: existence, as it is, without meaning or purpose, but inevitably returning, without an end in the null: *"the eternal return"*. This is the extreme form of nihilism: the eternal nul la (the 'meaninglessness')' (VIII, I, 201). The fulfilment of nihilism requires the thought of the eternal return. This means that we must not only think that life does not aim at anything and that, like the turning of the planets, it pursues nothing in its race but itself: just as the planets travel millions of kilometres to simply continue in their orbit, so life does everything that the mechanics and energy of the cosmos allow it to do – and nothing else. But we must

to think also that all this returns eternally. Nietzsche's conclusion is consistent:

> The overall character of the world is chaos for all eternity (V, 11, 136-37).

But who is able to bear this terrible thought that seems to make existence unbearable? It is the 'superman'. This figure
- as Heidegger explained (Heidegger, 1961: 204, 241) - is not to be understood in the sense of a prodigious being who has enhanced the faculties of the normal man to excess, but as the one who 'surpasses' the traditional man in that he dispenses with the attitudes, beliefs and values of the latter and has the strength to create new ones. The transvaluation of all values is the movement that opposes nihilism and surpasses it: it breeds the 'super-man' as the one who expresses the highest concentration of the *will to power* and who accepts the eternal return of things.

The question with which the aforementioned fragment on European nihilism concludes, namely "How would such a man think about the eternal return?" (VIII, 11, 206), indicates precisely that after the abolition of the an tithesis between the real and apparent worlds, i.e. after the Platonic-nihilistic worldview has been overcome, the task remains of rethinking the meaning of becoming without falling back into the schemes and values produced by the Platonic-nihilistic dichotomy or, worse still, into its surrogates. And it is precisely the doctrine of the eternal return that offers Nietzsche such an opportunity.

As we can see, the analysis of nihilism as the logic of decadence, the doctrine of the will to power and the hypothesis of the eternal return are connected in a coherent theoretical sequence.

*Chapter Eight*

# NIHILISM, RELATIVISM AND DISENCHANTMENT IN THE 'CULTURE OF CRISIS'

Nietzsche evoked the ancient doctrine of the eternal return in terms of a suggestive teaching that promised to give existence a new centre of gravity and make the perennial becoming of all things bearable. The hypothesis with which he introduces the eternal return at the end of the first edition of *Gaia scienza* (1882), in the passage entitled 'The Greatest Weight', has become classic:

> What would happen if, one day or night, a demon crept stealthily into the loneliest of your solitudes and said to you: "This life, as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live it again and again innumerable vol you, and there will never be anything new in it, but every pain and every pleasure and every thought and sigh, and every unspeakably small and great thing in your life will have to return to you, and all in the same sequence and succession – and so will this spider and this moonlight in the branches and so will this moment and myself. The eternal dust-clock of existence is being wound again and again - and you with it, you speck of dust from the dust! Or, how much would you have to love yourself and life, so that *you would desire* nothing more than this last eternal sanction, this seal? (V, II, 236-37).

From the moment of its discovery onwards – which took place, as recalled in *Ecce homo,* in August 1881 along Lake Silvaplana in the pres si of Surlei, 'six thousand feet beyond man and time' (VI, I, 344)

- The thought of the eternal return will never again abandon Nietzsche, who will elaborate this conception of his, 'the supreme formula of affirmation that can ever be attained', in numerous fragments and will put it forward in at least two other important public communications. The first is *in Zarathustra.* This work, which can be regarded as Nietzsche's masterpiece, is in its entirety the grand elaboration and communication of the doctrine of the eternal return. The second is found in *Beyond Good and Evil* encapsulated in the formula *"circulus vi tiosus deus?"* (VI, n, 61 -62) which, despite the many exegesis it has been given, remains an enigma to this day.

It is a fact, however, that the inherently esoteric character of the eternal no return, the apparent contradiction in which it stands with the doctrine of the will to power, the difficulty of interpreting it in the meaning and consequences with which it burdens human existence and the ontological interpretation of becoming were obstacles to its fortune. It would have taken Heidegger and Lowith, in the philosophical field, as well as Borges and Kundera, in the literary one, to fully penetrate the meaning of the eternal return and show its essential belonging to Nietzsche's thought.

At the turn of the century and in the first decades of the 20th century, it was the diagnosis of decadence and the crisis of values, i.e. the theorisation of nihilism and the far-sighted prediction of the consequences it would trigger, that made Nietzsche such a widely read author that he occupied the place in the German soul that had previously belonged to Schopenhauer, and in his own intellectual education. His work has thus stretched its shadow over much of the thought and culture of the late 19th and early 20th century, and has not ceased to torment the philosophical understanding of our time. When the dialectical synthesis had become imprati cable, undermined by the development of the scientific image of the world, reference was made to Nietzsche's thought in order to compensate for the philosophical vacuum that had opened up in the 'post-Hegel era' and to avoid both of the pitfalls into which it was all too easy to fall: nostalgia for the lost dialectical totality or flat adherence to the positivism of facts. However, by following the Nietzschean paradigm in an increasingly tenacious and angry manner, not only did the con sumption of the great ideals of God, the Good and the True occur, but any possibility of filling the resulting void of meaning was undermined. In addition, the criticism inspired by Nietzsche, corrosive and dissolving, was not merely descriptive but helped to produce, or accelerate, the state o f crisis it described. The outcome is well known: it was the 'desert that grows', the lengthening shadow of nihilism.

That is why in our century Nietzsche has aroused enthusiasm and attracted anathema, inspired attitudes, cultural fashions and styles of thought, but at the same time provoked equally rational reactions and rejections. He was a good prophet of himself when, in the fatal monologue of *Ecce homo*, he predicted that one day his name, that of the first immoralist and destroyer par excellence, would be linked to a profound collision of consciences, to an unparalleled cataclysm of spirit.

An eloquent testimony to the spread of his 'myth', but at the same time to its dual effect of attraction and repulsion, is the sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies′ *The Cult of Nietzsche. Una criti ca (Der Nietzsche-Kultus. Eine Kritik,* 1897). After having been an enthusiastic Nietzschean himself - he had especially appreciated the *Nasci*
*of the tragedy* in which he saw the idea of a 'Dionysian community' depicted, which is the basis of the famous distinction between 'community'
*(Gemeinscha/t*) and 'society' *(Gesellscha/t)* that he introduced – Tonnies removed his youthful passion and loudly proclaimed the visceral reasons why it was urgent to oppose Nietzschean nihilism: they were essentially individualistic immoralism and the elitist and anti-democratic conception that the late Nietzsche had arrived at.

But this and other stances did not stem the Nietzsche-inspired ni chilistic tide that was rising. Scores of artists and men of letters continued, tirelessly, to look to him as a myth to emulate: Gide, Strindberg, von Hofmannsthal, George, Musil, Broch, Klages, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Benn, Jiinger are the names that stand out among many others. In the strictly philosophical field, too, thinkers from the most diverse backgrounds incorporated his doctrines: Vaihinger, von Hartmann, Simmel, Spengler, Jaspers, Heidegger and al tri again. Even Carnap, in his famous 1931 essay in which he tried to demolish all past, present and future metaphysics by means of the logical analysis of language, recognised Nietzsche's 'metaphysics' as having a legitimate, if only 'aesthetic', status (Carnap, 1969: 53 1.

The full nihilistic experience occurred above all when the influences of Nietzschean thought converged with the relativistic outcomes of historiography. This occurred in particular within the so-called 'philosophy of life' and in the series of criticisms of civilisation that characterised European reflection in the first decades of the 20th century. Starting from the Nietzschean con- vinction that there was a radical and unsurmountable antagonism between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, i.e. between life and the spirit, between nature and culture, between the soul as a living principle and the spirit as a being, the philosophy of life.

and forms as schemes within which life is captured, expression was given – philosophical, literary and artistic – to a widespread distrust of reason's claims to synthesis and a corresponding call for the other dimension of 'life'. Life – as was being affirmed – had to be grasped at its original level, in its own characteristics, and not according to traditional theoretical methods, which, by adjectivizing it, relegated it and in principle prevented a genuine grasp of it. A significant relativistic and nihilistic outcome of the philosophy of life occurred with the thought of the late Georg Simmel. After his initial adherence to evolutionary positivism, Simmel later moved towards neo-criticism and the philosophy of values, and through his study of Bergson and Nietzsche, he arrived at a pessimistic philosophy of life with mystical results, which is expressed above all in his work *Intuition of Life. Four Metaphysical Chapters (Lebensan schauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel,* 1918). It is significant that in 1897, Simmel reviewed the aforementioned booklet by Tèinnies in critical terms, defending Nietzsche against the accusation of immoralism and opposing it with a valorisation of Nietzsche's concept of 'nobility' or 'distinction' *('Vornehmheit').* This review indicates how Sim mel was then engaged in an assimilation of Nietzschean thought. After 1900, the latter will increasingly impregnate his tragic vi sion of culture, his *Kulturpessimismus*. The basic conviction that Simmel will mature is that the plurality of worlds and spheres that the study of the history of the human spirit reveals – *myth*, art, religion, science, technology – do not compose themselves in a synthesis and conciliation. Each of these spheres seems to assert itself in its autonomy and validity; in each of them, an or ganic tendency is manifested that is an expression of life, which asserts itself and empowers itself by selecting the truths that are useful to it and by letting that which harms it succumb as false. Life stands in perpetual contrast to the cultural forms that it itself produces, insofar as the latter hold gift to crystallise.

> Faced with the life of the soul, which vibrates ceaselessly, developing without limit, and which is in some sense creative, is its solid, ideally immovable product, which has the disquieting retroactive effect of fixing, or rather rigidifying, that vitality: often, it is as if the creative dynamism of the soul moved into its product (Simmel, 1985: 193).

But the tendency for objective forms, once produced, to preserve themselves against the subjective life that produces them, hence the predo-

mination of the object over the subject, which becomes the winning tendency in modernity, lead in the sphere of culture to the 'unlimited extension of the objective spirit' (Simmel, 1985: 211). There is then a hypertrophy of objects, products and cultural offerings that subjective life is no longer able to take in or assimilate. In this dyscrasia, that is, in the inadequacy of the productions of the objective spirit compared to the assimilative capacity of the subjective spirit, lies the 'tragedy of culture'. As Siegfried Kracauer wrote in the essay *Die Wartenden (Waiting)*, published in the 'Frankfurter Zeitung' of 22 March 1922 , this philosophical perspective that saw life as 'the ultimate Absolute' was 'a gesture of despair of relativism'.

The motif *of Kulturpessimismus*, which Simmel caressed with raf finesse and moderation, was pushed to the extreme and exhibited in its crudest form by Oswald Spengler. In him, the assimilation of Nietzschean pensie ro, historicist relativism and the demands of the philosophy of life combined into a true philosophy of history and crisis with a sceptical-nihilistic bent. Already in his succinct doctoral thesis (1 904), in which he was passionate about Heraclitus' philosophy of becoming and embraced the idea of the eternal flow of things, Spengler showed, in the footsteps of Nietzsche, a pronounced inclination towards the tragic worldview. Everything becomes, everything passes away, everything is re lative: the maxim that Spengler declared to follow was to regard 'the world as history'. By taking this attitude, which for him meant a Copernican revolution, Spengler intended to be the Galilei of history, the one who deciphered the unstable and changing language of what is born, grows and perishes. All of this was declined in a grim pessimism, against which Spengler claimed the robust and virile attitude of the Roman, while ostentatiously scorning that of the *Graeculus histrio,* artist and philosopher. Against university philosophizing, which he felt was not up to the tasks of the contemporary era, i.e. the era of 'Caesarism', he declared that he wrote "for men of action and not for critical spirits". His pessimism was not meant to be 'a system in which to speculate' but 'an image of the world in which to live'. 'Philosophy for its own sake,' he wrote in the essay *Pessimismus?* of 1921, 'I have always despised it profoundly' (Spengler, 1937: 64 ).

In his capital work The *Decline of the West (Der Untergang des Abendlandes),* which was published in two parts at the end of the war (1918-1 922) and was an immediate success with the public, he envisaged a 'morphology of universal history' in which the succession of different civilisations, each considered as an organism with its own

'form' and closed within its own horizon, it is determined not by rational designs and aims but by the rhythm of life that characterises them and which is analogous to that of the individual: birth, growth, decline and death. Civilisations do not develop and succeed each other by building on each other, but each by virtue of its initial impulse and following its own energetic rhythm, having in itself the beginning and the completion of its life cycle. If this is so, universal history cannot have a linear development, but rather will have a cyclical character. Behind this vi sion lies the conviction, of Nietzschean origin, that life, as the common character of all that becomes, is countered by the spirit, that is, the stabilising principle of form and rationality. Now, according to Spenglerian prognosis, the life force of western civilisation, suffocated by the forms of culture, civilisation and technology, would have entered its twilight phase. Not by chance, but by an ineluctable necessity that is written in the rhythms of sto ria. And since what is the fruit of necessity does not grant the freedom to choose or refuse, those caught in the wheel of universal history have no choice but to accept this fate, because, as Spengler is pleased to recall with Seneca: *ducunt fata volentem, nolentem trahunt.* Instead of a science of history, Spengler had thus given birth to a metaphysics of becoming in dark and apocalyptic tones, which fed the atmosphere of crisis into which German culture had effectively plunged after the First World War.

Spengler's nihilistic pessimism acted as a point of reference, both positively and negatively, for a whole series of civilisation critiques and 'crisis philosophies' that characterised the cultural atmosphere in Germany between the wars. In the copious literature that emerged, alongside *Kulturpessimismus*, the need to overcome it and to cure the nihilistic pathologies of modernity.

Even before the *Sunset of the West*, a widespread of
sage, which soon translated into an open reaction against the bourgeois civilisation of the Wilhelmine era, t h e positivistic worldview and optimistic belief in progress that characterised the
"Belle Époque". Just think of the murky, opaque irrationalism, inspired
ry to the romantic philosophy of Carus, the mythological investigations of Ba chofen and Nietzsche's tragic conception of life, which animated the Dionysian visions of the so-called 'cosmic' circle of Alfred Schu ler and the young Ludwig Klages in Munich at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Or to the cultural line successfully promoted by Eugen Diederichs, the founder in 1896 of a publishing house that supported a neo-mystical fashion and collaborated with the German artist Eugen Diederichs.

It was only after the First World War, with the advent of the Weimar Republic, that they would separate into the De Stra and Left fronts, but who were then united in their search for an alternative to 19th century bourgeois society, such as Fer dinand Avenarius, Walter Benjamin, Eduard Bernstein, Lujo Brenta no, Martin Buber, Hans Freyer, Hermann Hesse, Karl Korsch, Ernst Krieck, Gyorgy Lukacs. For this reason, analyses of decadence that would otherwise have to be separated such as those of Lukacs in I.:*anima e le/orme (Die Seele und die Formen,* 1911), by Walter Rathenau in *For the Critique of Present Time (Zur Kri tik der Zeit*, 1912) and *Di cose venture ( Von kommenden Dingen,* 1917), by Rudolf Pannwitz in *La crisi della civiltà europea (Die Krise der eu ropdischen Kultur,* 1917).

After Spengler, some following him, some against him, some independently of him, the ranks of the 'critics of civilisation' grew to an unbelievable extent: Theodor Lessing, the friend and follower of Kla ges with his murky personality, with *History as the Making Sense of the Meaningless ( Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen,* 1919) and *The Cursed Civilisation (Die verfluchte Kultur,* 1 92 1 ); the neo-Germanic Leopold Ziegler with his successful two-volume work *Metamorphosis of the Gods (Ge staltwandel der Gotter,* 1920); Protestant theologian Albert Schweitzer with *Decadence and Reconstruction of Civilisation ( Ver/all und Wiederau/bau der Kultur*, 1 923 ), and on the Catholic side Romano Guardini with *Lette re dal Lago di Como. Pensieri sulla tecnica (Brie/e vom Comer See. Ge danken uber Technik,* 1 927). And again Hermann Keyserling, the founder of the "School of Wisdom", with *The Spectre of Europe (Das Spek trum Europas,* 1927); Freud with *The Malaise of Civilisation (Das Unbehagen in der Kultur,* 1929); and finally the psychologist, mythologist and graphologist Ludwig Klages with his impressive work *The Spirit as an Antagonist of the Soul (Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, 1929-32), whose title became a slogan on the lips of the younger generations.

In the more rigorously philosophical field, exits from the nihilistic crisis were envisaged by Bloch in *The Inheritance of Our Time (Erbscha/t dieser Zeit,* 1918), by Lukacs in *History and Class Consciousness (Geschichte und Klassenbewufttsein*, 1 923 ), by Scheler in *I.:man in the age of levelling (Der Mensch im Zeitalter des Ausgleichs*, 1 929), by Jaspers in The *Spiritual Situation of Our Time (Die geistige Situation der Zeit,* 1 93 1 ), by Husserl in *The Crisis of the European Sciences (Die Krisis der eu ropiiischen Wissenscha/ten,* 1936), by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialet tics of the Enlightenment (Dialektik der Au/klirung,* 1947).

The phenomenon of the 'critique of civilisation' was, however, not limited to the 'civilisation criticism'.

the German-speaking cultural sphere, but manifested itself throughout Europe: in the France of Valéry (La *Crise de l'esprit,* 1919) and Julien Benda (La *Trahison des clercs,* 1927), but also in that of the Russian emigrants Sestov *(La Philosophie de la tragédie,* 1926) and Berdiaev *( Un nouveau Moyen Age,* 1 927) and in the initiatory one of Guénon *(La Crise du monde moderne,* 1 927 ); in the Spain of }osé Ortega y Gasset *(La rebeli6n de las masas,* 1930) and in the Holland of Johan Huizinga with *In the Shadows of Tomorrow (In de schaduwen van morgen,* 1 93 5) and *The Waste of the World (Geschonden wereld,* 1 945 ).

In spite of the frenetic overlapping of perspectives and motives that characterised it, all this literature contributed to heightening the feeling that a historical cycle was coming to an end and that with it came the demise of the Vetero-European orders and values of traditional religion, metaphysics and morality. The icy winds of the new critical consciousness that was taking shape, and which came to have its clearest expression in Max Weber, swept away the haze that was gathering over that cultural landscape.

Already at the end of his first major reconstruction of the processes of rationalisation that characterise the development of modernity and which have science, technology and bureaucracy as their leading factors, in the famous conclusion of the *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism (Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus,* 1904-1905) Max Weber welcomed the new spirit of modernity, but warned at the same time that the 'thin mantle of rationalisation', Initially at the service of the world of life, it had become a 'steel calot ta′ *(stahlhartes Gehiiuse),* under which the children of modernity, at the height of Western civilisation, were in danger of becoming 'spiritless specialists and heartless hedonists'. And in a harsh judgement on the 'last man' he added: 'This Nothing believes he has risen to a stage of humanity never reached before' (Weber, 1965: 3 06).

At the end of his scientific work, a year before his death, in two famous lectures he gave in Munich in January 1919 during the profound crisis following the First World War - *Science as a Profession (Wissenschaft als Beruj)* and *Politics as a Profession (Politik als Beruj)* – Max Weber offered an even clearer and more illuminating analysis of the historical perspective that was emerging. With a few essential strokes he showed how scientific rationalisation had produced an irreversible 'disenchantment′ *(Entzauberung),* secularising the old worldviews of mythological-religious origin and replacing them with an 'objective' image. And if, through the descriptive neu- trality of his diagnosis, it transpired, not too covertly

tion, a stance in favour of the new situation, hence of the progress of science and reason, Weber also appeared to be aware of the harsh fate reserved for modernity. Having lost the inno cence of its origins, humanity, which has eaten from the tree of knowledge, is no longer disposed to the *sacri/icium intellectus* and becomes refractory to all faith. It pays for its achievements with the inability to rationally ground ultimate values and life choices.

It is the fate of our age,' Weber wrote, 'with its characteristic rationalisation and intellectualisation, and above all with its disenchantment with the world, that it is precisely the ultimate and most sublime values that have withdrawn from the public sphere to take refuge in the extra-mundane realm of mystical life or the fraternity of immediate relationships between individuals (Weber, 1922: 612; cf. 1948: 41).

The consequence of disenchantment is the polytheism of values, the com presence of instances and ultimate life choices in perpetual conflict with each other, whose antagonism is rationally undecidable. The isosthenia of values leads to the devaluation and ultimately to the indifference of values. Po liteism is no longer polytheism of values but of decisions. Not even ar t appears capable of creating new values: compared to the reality of rationalisation, it can be 'protest' that easily becomes 'flight' or 'integration' that easily turns into 'apologia'. In this cultural-historical situation 'devoid of gods and prophets', in which Weber saw coming not 'the blossoming of summer', but a 'polar night of glacial obscurity and rigidity' (Weber, 1 92 1: 559; cf. 1948: 120), there remains, as the only possible heroism of reason, nothing left but to take leave of nostalgia for the lost whole and global expectations of salvation. Weber asserted this both against his friend Ernst Troeltsch, who in his lecture *German Culture (Deutsche Bildung,* 1918) placed his hopes in the three great traditional powers that had formed Europe, namely humanism, Christianity and the Germanic spirit, and above all against the sects and prophets that were springing up
everywhere – as Thomas Mann had already grasped in his novella *Visit to the pro/ethnic (Beim Propethen,* 1904) and as he himself saw in the example of the esoteric circle formed around Stefan George, a circle that immediately reacted to Weberian theses with Erich von Kahler's The *Profession of Science (Der Beru/der Wissenschaft,* 1920).

Instead, Weber appealed to the sense of responsibility of the intellectual and the scientist and called for a virile living, without prophets or redeemers, of the fate of the relativism and nihilism of our age by following, in dedication to the task of the day, the demon that holds

the threads of one's existence. For those who were not capable of this, all that remained was the sacrifice of the intellect, and with it the return to the ever mercifully open arms of the brotherhood and the churches: let the disciple also return to the prophet and the believer to the redeemer; but for those who had made reason the guiding thread of their existence, the only virtue left was the radical exercise ofreason itself.

Reason remains lucid only if it does not submit to any heteronomous principle, but gives itself its own law and its own form: the power of the rational lies in dissolving all substantiality and in standing as the foundation of itself. The exercise of reason is the virtue of a worldly asceticism that recognises and accepts the creaturality of this world, but which renounces any value of transcendence and considers finitude as the only temporal dimension in which the success or failure of existence is measured.

In this sense can be read the abstinence that Weber rac commanded at the end of his first Munich lecture, echoing the words of the song of the Idumean schola in the oracle of Isaiah:

> A voice calls out from Se'ir in Edom: "Sentry, how much longer will the night last?". The sentinel replies: "Morning will come, but still it is night. If you want to ask, come back another time' (Weber, 1922: 613; cf. 1948: 42).

*Chapter Nine*

## AESTHETIC-LITERARY NIHILISM

In the widespread mistrust of the optimistic ideals of progress and humanity's great march towards the better, the cumbersome presence of a force was increasingly felt, which – however it was called and exorcised – did not appear governable by reason, but rather seemed to enslave it to its own blind ends. The concepts that were coined to evoke it deeply marked the cul tural atmosphere of the time: *Wille zur Macht* (Nietzsche), *élan vita!* (Bergson), Er *lebnis* (Dilthey) or *Leben* (Simmel, Klages), *Paideuma* (Frobenius), Es or Unconscious (Freud), the Archetypal (Jung), the Demonic (Th. Mann). Newly coined, they soon became slogans around which the attention of the younger generations was catalysed. Rightly or wrongly, they ended up being flaunted against the 19th century cult of science and reason.

It is not surprising that in such an atmosphere, a search for alternative resources to rationality was set in motion. The main one and the most attempted was ar t. Not that this represented anything new. There was a whole and noble tradition that had considered the Beautiful as the 'splendour of the True'; even in times not so long ago, Romanticism had seen art as a privileged access route to the Absolute; Schopenhauer had theorised it as catharsis from the Will; Nietzsche as the only metaphysical activity that life still allows us; The artistic avant-gardes of the early 20th century had conspicuously emphasised the guiding function of art, proposing it as a revelatory experience to be relied upon whenever rationality no longer knew how to give being and existence a meaning that redeemed them. The literature of the crisis is teeming with speculative ferments that make use of the emancipatory potential of art to

attempt to traverse nihilism and overcome it. Musi!, Broch, but above all Benn and Junger exploited the aesthetic-lethal resources of the form to this end, grappling closely with Nietzsche's diagnosis of decadence and nihilism.

This diagnosis, at least in the German context, imposed itself forcefully and profoundly shaped the experience of entire generations. Even personalities educated in the values of classical humanism, such as the Mann brothers, were fatally attracted to it. Not only Heinrich, who from the emi gnition edited a successful anthology of Nietzsche's 'immortal thoughts')) for the famous 'Living Thoughts Library') (which also housed his brother's *Schopenhauer*). Even Thomas, as reluctant as he was to any form of aesthetic-lethal extremism, was deeply influenced by reading Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Already in his early twenties, he had studied and annotated *Au rora* and *Gaia scienza* extensively. We know that he then carefully read the second *Unactual Consideration, Ecce homo* and the epistolary - and that he reread them during the preparation of the novel *Doktor Faustus* (1947), whose protagonist, the musician Adrian Leverkiihn, has the biography of
Nietzsche. Nietzschean thoughts also recur in the conversations of the protagonists of The *Enchanted Mountain (Der Zauberberg,* 1 924). And this presence of Nietzsche has a correspondence in Thomas Mann's non-fiction – from the *Considerations of an Impolitic (Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen,* 1918), which develop the Nietzschean motif of the opposition between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation,* up to the two studies expressly dedicated to Nietzsche in 1 924 and 1 948.

Nietzsche was for Thomas Mann a thinker who had experienced philosophy not as 'cold abstraction)) but as 'experience, suffering, sacrifice for humanity)). As such, Nietzsche had felt and forewarned the new. His tragic, Hamletic figure appeared to him 'circled by the flaming flashes of a renewing world')) (Th. Mann, 1980: 1 04). Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism was the filter he used to focus his own representation of the crisis. But, anxious as he was to resurrect the much-trodden values of the humanistic tradition, it was inevitable that Nietzsche's aesthetic nihilism with its romantic exaltation of evil and its destruction of morality would appear to him as a dangerous phantasmagoria. With respect to the demonic forces Nietzsche evoked, with respect to the struggle he unleashed of instinct against reason, Thomas Mann declared:

He who takes Nietzsche seriously, who takes him literally and believes him, is persured (Th. Mann, 1968: III, 46; cf. 1980: 100).

But while keeping his distance from him and above all from the 'ten thousand professors of the irrational who, in his shadow, have sprung up like mushrooms all over Germany' (Th. Mano, 1980: 1 02 ), he recognised that Nietzsche had been right when he had pointed to the discord between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, between instinct and reason, between life and spirit, as the source of civilisation's maladies. Going beyond Nietzsche, i.e. beyond the 'tragic fate' that he had represented, it was a matter of reconstructing reason on new foundations and conquering a new and deeper concept of *humanitas,* capable of satisfying t h e demands of life that Nietzsche had initiated.

Less conspicuous and quieter, but no less important, is the reception of Nietzschean nihilism in Robert Musil. Like many other writers of his generation, Musil read Nietzsche at a young age of eighteen. In *I.:German Man as Symptom (Der deutsche Mensch als Symptom,* 1 923 ), he himself declares that Nietzsche was, along with Marx, Bergson, Bismarck, among the figures who had most
influenced the formation of the German soul from 1890 to his own day (Musil, 1978: 1355). And this statement should be understood in the strong sense that results from another statement of his a few years earlier (1918):

> Kant can be true or false. Epicurus or Nietzsche are neither true nor false, but are either alive or dead (Musil, 1986: 67 ).

However, unlike in the case of many other writers of his generation, the Musilian exploitation of Nietzsche is not ostentatious, does not make strong theses and proclamations, but proceeds latently and is always accompanied by a vigilant attention to the dangers of epigonal Nietzscheanism. Against it he willingly hurls the strides of his subtle irony, as in the case of Spengler, criticised in his
"notes for readers who have escaped the sunset of the West" entitled *Spi rite and experience ( Geist und Er/ahrung,* 1921), or in that of the universal stories of decadence targeted *in Europe abandoned to itself (Das hilflose Europa,* 1922). This did not prevent Musil from making abundant references to Nietzsche in his masterpiece – the example of Clarissa with her declared enthusiasm for the works of the philosopher-writer is sufficient for all – but also from elaborating, in the novel's own manner, Nietzschean motifs such as t h e analysis o f decadence and its manifestations, the critique of morality and traditional values, perspectivism, aestheticism, genius and the pathologies of creativity
artistic, the overcoming of nihilism through the artist's experiential existence.

Even sharper, in terms of Nietzsche's fortune, is the case of Hermann Broch. His literary production, famously fuelled by an articulate philosophical reflection on the 'disintegration of values' *(Zer/all der Werte),* is unthinkable without Nietzsche's theorisation of Nietzscheanism. While clearly distancing himself from it, Broch acknowledges that Nietzsche is right in taking the decay of values a s a key to understanding the contemporary crisis. He reproaches him, however, for simply having turned the
old values and not having been able to create new ones. Nietzsche would have remained within an 'isomorphic' horizon with respect to the traditional one, i.e. he would not have really stepped outside the perspective of the values he intended to criticise and would simply have re-proposed them in an inverted form. Influenced by neo-Kantism, in his essay *Ethik* (1914), based on Houston Stewart Chamberlain's book on Kant, Broch asserts that the Kant of practical reason, with his 'heroic scepticism', demolishing the edifice of dogmatism, would have opened up a 'far deeper nihilism' and effected a 'far more radical overthrow of values' than Nietzsche. With his determination of freedom he would have given rise to 'the most powerful scepticism of all time' (Broch, 1977: X/1, 246-47 ). But the reason why Broch definitively distances himself from Nietzsche is the primacy over aesthetics that he intends to assign to ethics. And in any case, art, which in Nietzsche is a function of life nihilistically conceived as pure will to power, becomes in him an expression and opening of truth. Men three for Nietzsche the <<Truth>>, if truth is permissible to speak of, is that
"kind of error" necessary for those in the becoming and its eternal
return, for Broch it is located in the timelessness proper to the 'original im magine' *( Urbild)* that artistic creation has the task of shining forth.

On the other hand, the one who assumed an attitude of almost unconditional admiration and emulation towards the 'Nietzsche model')) was Gottfried Benn. As early as 1935, in a letter to his friend Oelze dated 16 September, he wrote:

> Nietzsche was great, nothing greater this century has seen. And it was no greater than Nietzsche, who embraced it all and coexisted with it. He is the Rhine – or the Nile, I do not know exactly at this moment – the bearded old man on whom everything swarms, t h e reclining figure from whom the various species unfolds: this was Nietzsche for us all, without exception (Benn, 1977-80: I, 71).

After the war, in the radio lecture *Nietzsche cin quant anni dopo,* which stands at the antipodes of Thomas Mann's 1 947, Benn unhesitatingly reiterated his judgement. And he did so without too much concern for Nietzsche's 'political dangerousness', which in a climate of 're-education' *( Umerziehung)* many were quick to denounce. Not so much because Nietzsche himself, with foresight, had parried it by saying that he would have liked to have fences around his pen sires so that 'swine and the exalted' would not break into his gardens. But above all because Nietzsche remained for Benn, despite everything, 'the gigantic dominant figure of the post-Goethean era' and <<after Lu
the greatest genius of the German language', he who had suffered and anticipated all the decisive spiritual experiences of modern times, first and foremost that of nihilism and its overcoming through art (Benn, 1992: 254-55). In his autobiography of 1 949 he reiterated:

In truth, all that my generation discussed, all that it inte rorally confronted, one could say: that it suffered, or even: that it discussed far and wide – all this had already been expressed and exhausted and had found a definitive formulation in Nietzsche. Everything else was exegesis (Benn, 1986- 1991: v. 160).

The decisive experience anticipated by Nietzsche is that of nihilism and the new type o f man capable of withstanding the waves of nothingness.

Nietzsche ( … ) ushered in 'the fourth man' of whom so much is now said, the man with the 'loss of the centre', of a centre that we romantically try to reawaken. The man without moral and philosophical content who lives by the principles- pi o f form and expression. It is a mistake to believe that man even has a content or must have one ( … ) Man no longer exists at all, only his symptoms exist (Benn, 1992: 264).

From the perspective of the shattering produced by nihilism, Benn also explains Nietzsche's aphoristic style:

I now understand,' he told Oelze on 27 December 1949. 'why Nietz sche wrote in *aphorisms*. He who sees no more connections, no more trace of a system, can still only proceed by episodes (Benn, 1990: 81).

To the disorientation and emptiness caused by nihilism Benn reacts, following in the footsteps of Nietzsche, with the force of artistic creativity, with the metaphysics of expression and form. Art is the attitude ca peace to correspond to t h e impulse of the Dionysian force of life, to

express its perennial flow and inescapable perspective. This is because art produces the form, that is, the creative glimpse that penetrates the reality of becoming better than the metaphysical concept of truth can. From the artist's point of view, the fate of nihilism – rather than "sop brought manly" as Weber wanted – is to be experienced by enjoying it and going with it: "Nihilism is a feeling of happiness" (Benn, 1986-91: IV, 185). In an age 'in which it is not the spirit of God that hovers over the waters, but nihilism', Nietzsche's thesis 'that ar t is the only metaphysical activity to which life still obliges us' (Benn, 1992: 155) thus applies to Benn. This central motif, which Benn takes up almost verbatim from Fragment 853 of the *Will to Power,* is found again and again in his writings, touched upon and developed in different variations. It has its mirror counterpart in the other Nietzschean thesis, also taken up by Benn, according to which the world can only be justified as

"aesthetic phenomenon". This gives rise to an aestheticism that Benn fuses with another motif-pillar of his thought, that of the mo nological isolation and radical estrangement of the ego from the world. In *Brains (Gehirne,* 1915) we find its most searing literary expression and

in the poem *Two Things Only (Nur zwei Dinge),* i.e. 'the emptiness and the I that remains marked by it>>, the seal that Benn placed on his work in 1956. But since the identification with the 'Nietzsche model'>> is in Benn not at all epigonal, but productive, there is inevitably also transformation and distance. For Benn, for example, the

"chthonic force>> of life does not only want to preserve and increase as in Nietzsche, but also to perish. Life and death, *eros* and *thanatos*, are in dissolubly conjoined. This is why Benn believes that art is not limited to being a mere function of life, but must come to redeem life by crystallising it in static forms. Hence his ap prodo to a 'static metaphysics' of being that distances him from the Nietzschean exaltation of becoming. An aesthetic-metaphysical experiment, this, that would like to project itself beyond nihilism. But beyond Benn's post-nihilistic ur gencies, there is no doubt that - along with Jiin ger, Heidegger and Cari Schmitt – he remains among those who have thoroughly discussed the nihilistic destiny of the 20th century and attempted to open up ways out of it.

*Chapter Ten*

## BEYOND THE LINE OF NIHILISM: JÙNGER 'VERSUS' HEIDEGGER

A memorable confrontation on nihilism as a category for the dia gnosis of our epochal situation took place in the first half of t h e 1950s between Ernst Ji.inger and Heidegger. It is to the former's credit, with the intervention *Beyond the Line ( Uber die Linie,* 1 950) offered to Heidegger on the occasion of his 60th birthday, that he drew attention to the problem. To the second, with his response on the occasion of Ji.inger's sixtieth birthday (1955 ), that of having returned to the argo mento calling for a deeper philosophical questioning. Taken together, the two texts represent the most pene trante contemporary analysis of the problem of nihilism, an *itinerarium mentis in nihilum* on the scale of the twentieth century.

The object of contention is the 'line' of nihilism. It marks the turning point at which the contemporary epoch seems to have reached, the watershed that marks the consummation of the Old without the emergence of the New, the magical 'ze meridian' beyond which the old navigational instruments no longer apply and the spirit, subjected to an increasingly rapid technological acceleration, appears disoriented. Now, whereas for Ji.inger the spiritual *elites* must have the courage to cross the line and go forward

perta, and in this sense *Ober die Linie* means for him *trans lineam,*
Heidegger believes this is still premature and calls on 'those w h o think' to think more cautiously along the lines of nihilism

- the title means for him *de line* - trying to go back to the basics
the metaphysics of such a situation.

The common starting point from which the two are compared is

the conviction that the question of nihilism is central to our age. At the conclusion of *Beyond the Line* Jiinger writes:

> Those who have not experienced for themselves the enormous power of Nothingness and have not been tempted by it know very little about our age (Jiinger-Heidegger, 1989: 1 04).

For his part, already in 1 93 7, in a university course published in 1 961 in the *Nietzsche* (but then unknown to Junger), Heidegger had stated:

> The hardest, but also least misleading touchstone for testing the genuine character and strength of a philosopher is whether he experiences immediately and from the ground up, in the being of the entity, the nearness of nothingness. He to whom this experience remains precluded stands definitively and hopelessly outside philosophy (Heidegger, 1994: 382).

As for the concept of nihilism, even before the war, and above all in the essays The *Total Mobilisation (Die totale Mobilmachung*, 1 93 0), The *Worker (Der Arbeiter*, 1 93 2) and *On Pain ( Ùber den Sch merz,* 1934), Jiinger had already put forward a lucid and disenchanted vision of what was happening. He saw the crisis of civilisation, so much lamented by others, as the inevitable passage towards a new historical situation, one in which it is work, organised according to the im peratives of technology, that mobilises all the planet's resources, that unleashes all that being can give. The emptiness of 'values' and 'sense' that technology has produced does not provoke in him a pas sive and lamenting attitude, but a heroic nihilism of action. Strictly speaking, a positive use of the term nihilism should be avoided at this stage of Jiinger's thought. The theme that interests him is not yet nihilism.

nihilism, neither as a European nor as a planetary phenomenon, but rather the new principle of work that shapes all reality. I.:shadow of nihilism only looms for those who have not yet grasped and accepted this principle. Nihilism is thus still something negative and subordinate: it manifests itself where the spirit remains attached to the old va lors and lingers to lament their consumption. But neither the process of devaluing the supreme traditional values nor the effort to transform them into new values is what interests the Jiinger of the *Worker*. In a passage of this work, very significant in this regard, he states:

> It has become superfluous to continue dealing with a transvaluation of values, just see the New and take part in it (Jiinger, 1 978: VIII, 50).

It is only in the essay *On Pain* of 1934 that a spo rtation of the Jungian perspective can be recorded. For the first time, the idea that technology is a factor in nihilism makes its appearance: when the new form is not matched by the development of adequate content, when reality is shaped and transformed by technology without ideas, people and institutions adapting with the same speed, when discipline, organisational capacity and energy potential grow without an equal growth of new substance, then technology produces nihilism. At this point, the question arises as to the appropriate attitude man must take when the vortex of techno-logical acceleration seems to be sucking him in. Can man, having reached the zero point, hope for a 'new dedication of being' in which 'what actually is' flashes by? ]Unger has here reached the level of critical awareness manifested in the novel *On Marble Cliffs (Au/den Marmorklippen*, 1939) - "a book that with great boldness describes the abysses that lurk behind the orderly masks of nihilism' (Schmitt, 1 987: 24) - and from which he will also observe the situation after the war, in *Beyond the Line*.

In this essay - to be read together with *the Rebel's Treatise* (whose original title is *Der Waldgang,* 1 95 1) – }unger takes the pre-war cue and develops it into a full-fledged phenomenology of Nietzscheanism, with its awesomeness, manifestations and conse guences. As Heidegger acknowledges, it surpasses the copious Nietzschean-inspired literature on the subject in originality and effectiveness. Indeed, moving from Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, Junger draws a penetrating vision of nihilism as a process of the now ubiquitous and general 'vanishing of values'. His originality, compared to Nietzsche's model, lies in recognising the not only European but *planetary* nature of nihilism, and in optimistically proposing a therapy for the evils it has produced. It consists in the strenuous defence of the narrow but inviolable spaces o f individual interiority, by }unger considered the last possible bastion of resistance. Following this strategy, without failing in the conviction that what falls should not be kept standing but should be helped to fall, he does not stage a frontal attack against traditional values and orders, as is Nietzsche's style. In other words, he does not pose as a demolitionist, but rather puts in place a description that highlights the processes of decay, loss and consumption, which he calls 'reduction' and 'vanishing′ *(Schwund),* showing how they undermine every psychic, spiritual, aesthetic and religious sovereignty but also accelerate, in doing so, the approaching end of nihilism.

What is decisive is to understand where the line is, where and when its crossing comes, that is, the overcoming of nihilism. Now, contrary to the impression Heidegger's objections give, for Jiinger the line is not the end point, the term beyond which nihilism ceases. Rather, it is located within nihilism itself as its midpoint.

> The crossing of the line, the crossing of the zero point *divides* the spectacle; it indicates the midpoint, not the end. Safety is still a long way off (Jiinger – Heidegger, 1989: 79).

With the crossing of the line, then, the crossing of ni chilism is not yet complete. It approaches its ultimate goal, but has not yet reached its end.

It is true that, compared to Heidegger's prudence, Jiinger in
dulge in a certain optimism. In a 1993 retrospective on *Beyond the Line*, he recalls that that essay was 'the attempt of someone with two earthquakes who wanted to get back on track in a sta bib> way and that the particularity of the analysis of nihilism that was carried out in it
ta was "its optimistic nature" (cf. Jiinger, 1993 : 20) . It is clear that
In *Beyond the Line*, nihilism is presented as the stage of a spiritual trajectory that can be endured to the end, overcome and
"perhaps covered with new skin like a scar" (Jiinger – Hei degger, 1989: 50) . And to justify his relative optimism Jiinger no mines some positive signs that hint at a will to overcome nihilism. They are 'the metaphysical restlessness of the masses, the emergence of the individual sciences out of Copernican space, and the appearance of theological themes in world literature' (]unger – Heidegger, 1989: 90). But these are only warnings. The conquest of post-nihilistic territory is still far off. Rather, he who crosses the line enters the zone in which nihilism becomes a normal condition in the sense that it becomes an essential and constitutive aspect of reality. This is why it cannot be contained, let alone easily eradicated. The only way to resist its unstoppable advance is to erect an inner bulwark to defend the rare oases of freedom that remain in the 'growing de serto'. These oases – eros, friendship, art, death – are the wilderness *(Wildnis)* of interiority in which the individual, by c o m b a t i n g every attack, the appeals of the churches, the threats of Leviathan, the systems of organisation, manages to resist and m a i n t a i n equilibrium in the 'vortex of nihilism'.

Heidegger - who since the early 1930s had been intensively concerned with the

The author of the essay, Junger, who had taken an interest in technology as a key to understanding the modern world, and who in his university courses on *Nietzsche* had tackled the question of nihilism in a wide-ranging manner, acknowledges Junger's merit of presenting a penetrating view of the problem. By means of an original assimilation of the doctrine of the will to power, he would highlight the two essential features of today's reality: its total character of work and the consumption of every value and resource of meaning, i.e. *technology* and *nihilism*, and precisely as phenomena that are no longer just European but planetary.

The Jungian view thus focuses on two motifs that are also fundamental for Heidegger. For the latter, however, it is a matter of understanding these two traits in reference to the history of being as essential and extreme figures in the fulfilment of Western me taphysics. Heidegger's agreement with the picture drawn by Jiinger therefore only concerns the phenomenology of nihilism, i.e. the surface. As for the anamnesis of the illness, i.e. the search for the its historical roots and its deeper causes, he takes an al tra road and opens a dispute with Jiinger. He is naturally convinced that Jiinger's writings are not to be considered 'as archival acts of the nihilistic movement' (Jiinger – Heidegger, 1989: 119). But he considers that Jiinger's suggestive literary description of nihilism does not allow for a deep philosophical analysis of the disease. This is because in Jiinger's overview, neither the Nietzschean metaphysics of the will to power nor its fulfilment in technology as total mobilisation in the form of work are clearly understood in their authentic foundation, i.e. in relation to the history of being. In order to be able to do so, one must ask oneself about the epochal openness that makes the Nietzschean determination of being as will to power possible, and thus its development in the *Worker*'s de scription.

This openness is provided by metaphysics understood not as a discipline of philosophy, but as the 'clearing' *(Lichtung)* of being itself, i.e. as the way in which being opens up and retracts in relation to man, which has characterised the history of Western thought. Western man experiences the being that comes before him in a certain way: as something generated by nature or as an artefact, as a divine creation, as an extended reality, as an object, as matter susceptible to investigation, experiment and scientific research. What the entity is, or what the 'being of the entity' is, is experienced in a different way each time. Now, in understanding what entities

are in their 'being', man does not remain on the plane of entities but 'transcends', and such transcendence *(Uberstieg)* is for Heidegger "metaphysics'. Metaphysics is the occi dental man's fundamental way of understanding the being of being. What characterises the approach of metaphysics is the 'presenting' *(Anwesen)* of being in a certain way, with a certain 'being' of its own, to the man who understands it. From time to time, a certain understanding of the being of the being takes shape, i.e. a certain answer to the question "what is the being?" is established, in which the original openness of the "presenting itself", of the Anwesen, is forgotten. When being is definitively understood and determined as the will to power and as work, when the essential thing is to secure and make available being as a possible source of energy, then the original openness of the presenting of being, i.e. its being susceptible to different understandings of being, is occluded. Thus not only is forgetfulness of being established, but also forgetfulness of such forgetfulness. Metaphysical ni chilism is precisely this situation in which of being
"there is no more of it". The question that arises is: what to do?

Before anything else, the question of being must be recalled. But this is precisely what Jiinger neither does nor can do. Like the metaphysics that constitutes the unquestioned presupposition of his descriptions, Jiinger thinks within the horizon of forgetfulness of being. His very plastic and effective picture stops at the symptoms of nihilism, the devaluation of values and the loss of substance, but does not penetrate the essence. In the end, Heidinger remains a prisoner of nihilism itself. Heidegger's conclusion and judgement are peremptory:

> The attempt to cross the line remains at the mercy of a representation that belongs to the sphere in which forgetfulness o f being dominates. And it is for this reason that it is still expressed with the fundamental concepts of metaphysics (form, value, transcendence) Uiinger – Heidegger, 1989: 161).

Before wanting to overcome nihilism, it is indispensable for Heideg ger to grasp its essence, and this means understanding that nihilism is an event that belongs to the very history of being, to its giving and subtracting itself in the various historical-epochal openings of metaphysics. The traces of this movement of 'giving' and 'subtracting' being can be recognised in the fundamental traits of the history of metaphysics. In the texts included in the *Nietzsche*, written between 1 93 6 and 1 946 but published in 1961, Heidegger dealt in depth with the sto ria of metaphysics: he showed how Nietzschean nihilism is the

reversal of Platonism and how the archetypal figure of metaphysics that Platonism inau gurates and represents, which he calls 'subjectivity' *(Subiectità't),* is manifested in its extreme aspect.

It is not even the case here to attempt to illustrate the steps through which, in the Heideggerian reconstruction, Platonism transitions into the metaphysics of the will to power, and how the 'transcendence' of the Platonic ideal is transformed into the 'rescendence' of nihilism. What is essential is that the 'subjectivity' that arose with Platonism

– i.e. the "sovereign appearance" of man as the figure who becomes the bearer of the project for the cognitive and operative mastering of all that is - finds its essential inversion in the technical configuration of the being of the entity called *Gestell*. This term – which can be translated as 'implant' or 'set-up' and stands for the existence of that which is *placed,* artefactual, as opposed to that which is born, which is created, and which is not.

and grows spontaneously like entities by nature - is chosen by Hei

degger to indicate the essence of technique. The latter, as the total mobilisation of the world in the form of labour, is the epochal figure in which being is manifested and at the same time concealed at the end of the metaphysical destiny of the West. Platonism and nihilism thus appear to Heidegger as the two extremes of the same paradigm

– metaphysics – and both are seen as homogeneous and functional to the essence of technique. Technique is the last form of me- taphysics, i.e. Platonism, just as metaphysics is the prehistory of technique, i.e. nihilism. This is why Heidegger is convinced that the Worker form and the Platonic idea, once one attempts to pen them in their essential provenance, have a common origin in the epochal, technical-metaphysical constellation of the *Gestell.*

By setting his response in these terms, Heidegger, while being sympathetic to the Jingerian phenomenology of nihilism, recalls a more vigilant philosophical attitude. This is not to demolish such an effective and in many respects irreplaceable description of the symptoms of nihilism, but to take up its insights at a deeper level. In order to do so, however, one must question the presuppositions of the Jiingerian vi sion, i.e. the metaphysical horizon in which it moves and the concepts it uses as an optical system through which to look: 'for ma', 'domain', 'representation', <<Will', <<Value', 'security'. But it must then be understood above all that, if the crossing of the li nea is ever possible, it requires that nihilism is first truly accomplished, that is to say, understood in its metaphysical essence: "Instead of wanting to cross over nihilism, we must first gather in its *ex*

*without ( Wesen)'* (Tiinger – Heidegger, 1989: 1 62 ). This means understanding co-

but it is the consequence of an occlusion of the original openness of the presentation *(Anwesen)* of the entity in its being. Therefore, without moving, or rather taking up the problem that the line indicates, it is necessary to take a step backwards: not to stimulate the will to go beyond nihilism, nor to set up a new instrumentation to navigate at all costs, but to think of a "to pology" of nihilism and to identify in the history of being the essential place where the fate of nihilism is decided.

If in fact crossing the line of nihilism has as its essential condition the overcoming of metaphysics and the dimention of being, this overcoming cannot be 'willed'. Doing so would not only lead one back to a compromised metaphysical determination such as the will, but one would also end up believing that the forgetfulness of being is a mere 'machination' of man, i.e. it is within his power. Instead, it depends on being and its way of referring to man. Precisely in reference to the finitude of the one to whom it is destined, the giving of being is never absolute, but is always epochally determined and at the same time also always open to another epochal determination. This makes it simultaneously a giving of oneself and a withdrawing of oneself. When "subjectivity", i.e. the primacy of the individual as subject, comes to the forefront and claims to be the definitive answer to the question "what is being?", this means that being is "given" in the form of subtraction and negation, i.e. negation and nihilism.

Nor can rationality – even less than the will – be the Archimedean point on which to catapult oneself beyond nihilism. Even rationalism is for Heidegger an expression of subjectivity and anthropocentrism. Faced with ultimate things, where the whole is at stake, trust in the calculations of reason is no better than escapes into the irrational. Rationalism and irrationalism are for Heidegger - in agreement in this with Jiinger – two complementary and convertible figures of ni chilism. If nihilism is a destiny that depends on being, man's will and reason can, if anything, arrive at something penultimate. Once this has been radically acknowledged, it is no longer the case, either for Heidegger or Jiinger, to linger in devising possible ethics or virtues for the age of technology.

Recognising this does not mean renouncing responsibility. On the contrary, it means demanding that higher responsibility of thought that consists in taking on nihilism at its most problematic – without pretending to turn away the guest who has been wandering around the house for some time now, without closing one's eyes to the

fact that nihilism is now part of the reality in which we live. The only possible effect that thought can aim for is to produce an *acceleration* of nihilism. In Ji.inger, this happens through that peculiar description of the consummation, fading and reduction triggered by nihilism, which, by putting the decisive features of the new reality before our eyes, helps to produce it. In Heidegger, on the other hand, it happens through his disenchanted critique of values – a motive that he develops on several occasions, starting with his confrontation with Nietzsche and in opposition to neo-Kantism and the philosophy of values, and which leads him to argue that, if one really intends to overcome the
nihilism, there is no point in producing resistance and reactions, erecting the frail barriers of new values or attempting counter-movements. Instead, it is preferable to allow the immense power of nothingness to be unleashed and to
all the possibilities of nihilism are exhausted to their essential fulfilment.

This is not - as it may have seemed - an apologia for nihilism.
nihilism, neither in Ji.inger nor in Heidegger. Acknowledging that the acceleration of nihilism is the only way that can lead to its overcoming, d o e s not mean taking t h e side of nihilism or hailing it as the 'gay know-it-all', as the disenchanted lucidity that rejoices in having recognised that the 'true world', the meaning and truth of becoming are prospective illusions. Both Heidegger and Ji.inger invite us to experience the power of nothingness to its fullest extent, convinced that only with the total explanation of nihilism is its exhaustion also given and, with it, the pos sibility of its overcoming. In short, it is a matter of "letting t h e still intact sources of energy gush forth, and resorting to every aid, in order to regress 'into the vortex of nihilism'" (Ji.inger – Heidegger, 1989: 139).

But where to trace these sources of energy? On this point, the i tinerary of the two diverges. Ji.inger points to a point of resistance to which his later writings - the *Rebel's Treatise is* a good example - abound with increasing tenacity, but which is already identified here with too much clarity. It consists of the figure of the Anarch, the in dividual rebel who feels hunted by the armies of the churches and the Le viathan, but who knows that he no longer belongs to anything or anyone. Like Stirner's One, the Anarch is a loner who takes refuge in his own in teriority. He is not to be confused with the anarchist, he is not a revolutionary who wants to transform the world and who, in order to achieve his goal, is also willing to commit crime and terror. The Anarch may submit outwardly to order and law, but in his inner self, in the so litudine of the night, he thinks and does as he pleases. And even when he marches between the lines of an army, he only fights his wars. He takes refuge in the wilderness and in the few remaining oases to regenerate his strength. La

location of the Anarch is where Junger imagined himself to be in a note dated Paris, 9 July 1 942:

If I close my eyes, I sometimes glimpse a bleak landscape at the edge of the infi nite, with stones, cliffs and mountains_ In the background, at the edge of a black sea, I recognise myself, a tiny figure, almost sketched in chalk. That is my outpost, close to Nothingness – down there, in the abyss, I conduct my struggle alone Oiinger, 1978: Il, 344).

In *Beyond the Line* he concludes his remarks on the same motive, opening up an optimistic perspective:

One's own chest: here lies, as once in the Thebaid, the centre of all desert and ruin. Here lies the cavern towards which the demons drive. Here each one, of whatever condition and rank, leads his own struggle, and with his victory the world changes. If he prevails, the Nothing will pull back into itself, abandoning on the shore the treasures that its waves had submerged Oiinger – Heidegger, 1 989: 104).

Heidegger is more vigilant and guarded: there are no Archimedean points to lean on, no recipes or strategies to follow. To the Pelagians of the 20th century, convinced that salvation lies in their hands, Heidegger counters with the sentence: 'Now only a god can save us. If ever a foothold is possible, it lies in that heroism of the pen serum capable of patience, waiting for the 'other beginning', in the only position able to correspond to the epochal destiny of nihilism and technology, that is to say, of the era of the gods who fled and the new god yet to come: *GelaSJenheit,* the calm attitude of the 'ahbandono'.

*Chapter Eleven*

## NIHILISM, EXISTENTIALISM, GNOSIS

There is no doubt that Heidegger's work makes a fundamental contribution to the analysis of European nihilism. However, it highlights, in its final outcome, a singular paradox, which is at the same time the paradox of a significant part of contemporary thought. It is the fact that two extremes seem to touch and coexist in it.

me incompatible: a radical nihilism, on the one hand, and abandonment to inspired vision, if not mysticism, on the other. It is for this reason that the more one adheres to the

the one perspective, the more one is confronted with the problems that the other opens up. The radicalisation of philosophical questioning, which dresses everything up and consumes everything, produces, on the one hand, an acceleration of dis-solution, a strengthening of nihilism. On the other hand, in the fulfilment of this dissolution, thought opens up to the expectation of the totally al tro, to what is radically beyond what has been dissolved. The de-construction of the concepts and theorems of traditional philosophy results in an opening up to the problematic of the sacred and the divine. The do mandate that Heidegger considers 'the piety of thinking' implies the questioning and at the same time the search, dissolution and attitudes: it leads to that Nothingness which is the extreme purification of the finiteness that wants to strip itself of everything in order to access the divine, it leads t o that extreme point that Meister Eckhart called with words almost

blasphemes the point 'where the angel, the fly and the soul are the same co sa'. It is a questioning that razes metaphysics to the ground in preparation for the 'new beginning'.

The key that has best brought to light this possibility of coexistence between nihilism and mysticism is that

of the approach of Heideggerian thought to Gnosticism. This raf fronto is a variation from the more general take on the gno stic paradigm – separated from its historical location in late antiquity– as a palimpsest for an interpretation o f modernity. This road was already taken in the last century by Ferdinand Christian Baur. In our century, the initial credit for the rediscovery of Gnosticism goes t o Carl Gustav Jung and the meetings he promoted from the 1930s onwards in Ascona, of which the "Eranos Jahrbuch" provides documentation. But it was above all in the 1950s that t h e h e r m e n e u t i c fruitfulness of the Gnostic paradigm came to light and was discussed on a wider scale. The debate heated up around the theses argued re spectively by Eric Voegelin and Hans Blumenberg.

The former frontally attacked the legitimacy of the modern era, arguing that its development should be interpreted as the triumph of Gnosticism. Decisive philosophers for modernity such as Hegel, Marx and Nietz sche would be considered 'gnostic' insofar as a speculative scheme of gnostic derivation would be at work in their thought. In Hegel, the process in which the spirit comes to find itself again from a situation of alienation is, for Voegelin, analogous to the pere grination through which the alienated spark *(pneuma)* of the gnostics is

stics returns from its exile in the cosmos to its original fullness *(pie rome)*. In Marx, the dialectical process of history, which materialism allows to be recognised, frees man from alienation and transports him into the fullness of an integral human existence. In Nietzsche, the natural principle of the will to power transforms man, stifled by values that are hostile to life and now bloodless, into the Superman. In all three ca

the idea of man's self-salvation through gno

si, that is, through the knowledge of one's condition of captivity and alienation, which becomes the instrument of redemption. By virtue of gnosis, the degraded being restores its original piety by virtue of itself. For Voegelin, the modern triumph of gnosis means the immanentization of Christian eschatology, which ultimately leads to nihilism: God and man's spiritual life are sacrificed to civilisation with the consecration of all human energies to the enterprise of salvation through immanent action in the world.

Blumenberg firmly opposed these theses. He defended modernity, arguing that it is not so much the secularisation of Christianity, but rather the process of man's autonomous affirmation in the world. With its absolutization of the earthly dimension, modernity denies the Gnostic dualism still present in late medieval theological speculation that radically separates God and

world. Modernity, then, is not the triumph, but the second, definitive defeat of gnosis (cf. Faber, 1 984; Taubes, 1984 ).

What is of interest here – beyond the modern metamorphoses of gnosis – is that the dualistic gnostic paradigm allows contemporary ni chilism to be seen from a different, broader and more illuminating perspective. If Gnosticism, considered not as a historical phenomenon but as a paradigm of thought, can be interpreted as a kind of existentialist nihilism *ante litteram*, which through *annihilatio*
*mundi* operates a radical isolation of the soul in order to obtain the salvation and the reunion with God, then contemporary nihilism can in turn be read as a modern atheistic gnosticism: blind to all transcendence, it is concentrated in a tragic depiction of the uprootedness and disorientation of dead existence; existence, in its cosmic solitude, repeats the questioning of the stic, knowing that it will remain unanswered: who are we? where do we come from? where are we going?

It was mainly thanks to Hans Jonas, a pupil of Heidegger and Bultmann in Marburg, to have brought to light the structural connections between ancient Gnosticism and contemporary existentialism and nihilism, and to have used the Gnostic model of thought as an inter preative key to understanding the existentialist and nihilistic crisis of man today. From his thorough historical reconstruction of ancient Gnosticism, Jonas derived a typological profile to show how the comparison with the Gnostic paradigm frees the questions posed by nihilism and existentialism from the cage of absurdity and illuminates them with a broader meaning (Jonas, 1992: 23-47).

But Jaspers and Émil Bréhier had also noted the important analogy that exists between existentialism and nihilism on the one hand and Gnosticism on the other. In particular, Bréhier made very insightful remarks on the analogy that exists between the existential analytic of *Being and Time* and the structure of the Gnostic novel. In Heidegger the fall of individual existence into finitude is recounted, just as in Gnosticism the fall of the soul into the abyss of the world is recounted. Except that in *Being and Time*, the narrative lacks a beginning and an end, and it is precisely this ignorance of its origin and destination that gives the fictional life its dramatic tension – as in a tragedy whose origin and solution are unknown. To put it simply, the unfolding of the Gnostic novel is divided into the following episodes: l) first of all, there is the original Unity; 2) hypostases break away from this Unity, wanting to become independent – this is where sin and guilt lie – and fall into the world, in which, having forgotten, they are not able to be independent.

that of their origin and inclined to *curiositas,* are lost (which, according to Bréhier, corresponds to the Heideggerian 'cure'); 3) through knowledge *(gnosis),* some existences manage to overcome forgetfulness and regain reminiscence of their origin, returning to it.

Well, if one obscures the beginning and the end of the story, one obtains exactly the temporal sequence of finite existence in the dynamic of inauthenticity and authenticity as Heidegger describes it. Existential analytics would thus be the expression of a gnostic and nihilistic attitude that no longer knows the original divine unity nor believes in a return, but consumes everything in the empty and dramatic horizon of finitude.

This reading paradigm sheds light from a new angle not only on Heidegger's work, but also on two opposing developments in contemporary thought that were inspired by it: that in the direction of theology and philosophy of religion, and that in the direction of atheist and nihilist essentialism. The former tested the possibility of thinking about the sacred and the divine in the age of disenchantment, hostile to transcendence, by questioning the philosophical categories tacitly employed by traditional theologies and refining their conceptual tools. This has led to a re-evaluation of those ways of thinking about the divine, such as apophatic theology, in which a critical vigilance against God's positive de-terminations is implemented *ante litteram,* for different reasons and in different ways (cf. Weischedel, 1972; Garaventa, 1989). In this sense, it could even be argued – as Henry Cor bin did by comparing Jewish, Christian and Islamic monotheism – that the cause of the West's cultural nihilism is a consequence of the determination of God as a person and man as an individual. The metaphysical primacy that Occi dente accords to the principle of individuality and the cosmotheological dualism that results from it are thus called into question (cf. Corbin, 1986: 136 ff.; Guénon, 1972: 83-99). In the other direction, that of atheistic and nihilistic existentialism, attempted to think about the fatticity and finitude of existence, and precisely in the absurdity it derives from the lack of principles that explain it and give it meaning. In this perspective, the fusion of essentialism and nihilism – for example in the work of thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus – has made a decisive contribution to the thematisation and clarification of human existence.

In Sartre's writings, for instance, without the concept of ni chilism being employed as such, the presence of an explicit, sometimes almost ostentatious nihilistic attitude can be felt everywhere. This applies especially to the writings of the existentialist period. In *L'étre et le*

*néant* (1943) – whose intuitions are prepared and accompanied by a copious literary production, in which the philosophical novel La *nausée* (1938) stands out – nothingness and negativity stand out at the centre of the treatment and have a decisive function in Sartre's effort to define the radically free character of human existence. The latter, insofar as it is freedom, cannot be conditioned by any determination, any concept, any definition; it is for es without what it will choose to be, what it will become by its choice. Man is the being in whom existence precedes essence and determines it. Existence and freedom, thought coherently together, impose on the one hand the negation of God – since, if one were to admit this, one would have *eo ipso* a principle that would determine the essence of man before the existence – and on the other, they force man, left to himself, to invent his existence each time by deciding what to hunger for. Hence, the conscious freedom, the 'for-self', which exposes man to the inevitable burden of continual planning, is not an abstract freedom, but is always dropped into a situation, thrown into a condition, inserted into the world of things, of the 'in-self'. Existence is consciousness and freedom that transcends the world, but cannot transcend it except by referring to it continuously. Insofar as existence is then a body, it becomes a thing among things, an absurd contingency among contingencies. The body 'is the contingent form assumed by the necessity of my contingency' (Sartre, 1965: 385). The freedom of the for-self has in the contingency of the in-self its own term of reference: existence, as consciousness and freedom, is not reduced to the opaque gratuitousness of the being of the body or of things, but constantly denies and transcends it. It is expressed, all of it, in the freedom that constitutes it as per-itself and with which, denying all prior conditioning and all facticity, it projects itself from nothingness into nothingness. The freedom of existence human being, to be affirmed in the radicality of its consequences, implates a 'nihilisation' *(néantisation)* that deprives man of any external reference to lean on and forces him to withdraw into himself, to be his own freedom and his own nothingness. Freedom is in fact that peculiar mode of being that becomes lack of being, i.e. nothingness. Sartre's conclusion is consistent: man is a useless passion. The motif of Gnostic nihilism appears here, although not made explicit. On the other hand, those who are fully aware of the Gnostic structure underlying the his own existentialist and nihilistic reflection is Camus. This awareness is not surprising if one considers that in his dissertation *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme* (1936), in which the figures of Plotinus and Augustine are at the centre of the discussion, Camus dealt with Gnosticism and dedicated the entire second chapter of the work to it.

ro (Camus, 1 965: 1250-69). Although here he does not yet achieve either the perspective or the originality of the writings that made him famous, and it is therefore not possible to make precise connections, it can nevertheless be emphasised that his treatment of Gnosticism proceeds by 'themes' and 'solutions' and follows a problematic approach interested in grasping the structure of this thought. This points to an interest that is not merely historical but typological, in the light of which one cannot dismiss as a mere coincidence the fact that Camus chooses as the titles of some of his works so many gnostic metaphors: *! L'exile et le royaume.* The meta horizon also appears much clearer.
physical of nihilism that Camus treats and unfolds along the thread of the two motifs that obsess him, namely the absurd and the revolt of fi nitude. The first motif lies at the heart of *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1 942 ), where the gratuitousness of existence – once the gods are silenced or dead – is claimed as a human affair to be experienced without reason or explanation. The second motif substantiates what must be considered one of the most illuminating and profound studies on the problem of nihilism*, J;homme revolté* (1951). On the strength of his enviable literary ta lento Camus reconstructs the history of nihilism in an evocative review and finally presents the attitude of revolt as the only viable virtue to wrest meaning from the absurdity of the human condition.

But the theme of nihilism has found a propitious climate for attaining and spreading not only in the season and environments of essentialism. Favourable conditions also occurred in other places and moments of contemporary French thought, especially where the problem of finitude was taken up. For the confluence of existentialism and nihilism, typical of a certain French philosophical style, the importance of the seminars on Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* held by Alexandre Hegel cannot be overemphasised.
Kojève at the École des Hautes-Études between 1933 and 1 93 9 - and attended by, among others, Raymond Queneau, Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Raymond Aron, André Breton, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean Hyppo lite. It is no coincidence that, against more traditional readings of Hegel, in his seminars Kojève strongly emphasised and valorised the moment of *negativity* and its decisive function in the constitution of fi nitude and its figures.

But to give an immediately convincing idea of the presence of nihilistic themes in French culture, it will suffice to recall, for their paradigm value and the suggestions they evoke, two names: Georges Bataille and Emil M. Cioran. The former was present at the se-

minaries of Kojève, remained in contact with him to the point of asking him, at the beginning of 1 950, for a preface for the new edition of L:*expérience intérieure,* recognising in the end, however, the irreconcilability of their perspectives. His work is so difficult to embrace, that it is not even the case here to try to point out the common thread. What I would like to say is that it is shot through from top to bottom with the lucid awareness that nihilism is a constant shadow that inevitably accompanies us when we think in the absence of gods or when we strive to bring negativity, limitation and otherness into language. And this is precisely what happens in the three volumes of the 'summa atheologica' with which Bataille debuted as a philosopher: *L'expérience intérieure* (1 943 ) , *Le coupable* (1 944), *Sur Nietzsche* (1 945).

As for Cioran, his thought would also require an articulate discourse, but we will limit ourselves here to a single observation. His ope ra administers, page after page, a concentration of pessimism that mortally poisons all the ideals, hopes and meta-physical impulses of philosophy, that is, all the attempts to anchor existence in a sense that reassures it in the face of the abyss of absurdity that threatens it at every moment. Cioran's meditations push us to that point where each of us stands naked before our naked destiny. In La *chute dans le temps* (1964) – a title of clear gnostic origin – he says:

> We are not really us except when, confronted with ourselves, we coincide with nothing, not even our own singularity (Cioran, 1 995: 1 1 - 1 2 ).

In short, man is a self-conscious nothingness, he is 'he who is not': this is what Cioran asserts, overturning the Old Testament definition of God as 'he who is'. His constellation of thought does not go with merged with that of hopeful philosophies o f existence. It is rather that of the Gnostic who – aware of having fallen into time and finitude, of being free but at the same time a prisoner in the cramped cell of the universe – wants to save himself by virtue of himself and desperately denies any positive value of the world, setting fire with iconoclastic fury to all the images, ghosts and gods that populate it, even knowing that the abandoned altars will be inhabited by demons. A blatantly gnostic-nihilistic aura thus emanates from the writings of this godless mystic and condenses, like an obsession, along the sequence of his sharp aphorisms and essayistic wanderings. The Gnostic nihilism we are dealing with here is more evoked with

images and literary effects that it does not unfold and expound in the broad and rigorous turns of philosophical reasoning. But it is precisely in this way that the despair and at the same time the lucidity that sustains him, the melancholy and doggedness on which he feeds, the em pity that draws him towards the phosphorescence of evil and at the same time the devotion with which Cioran rushes towards that 'purest version of God' that is for him Nothingness, come to light in an almost dazzling manner.

*Chapter Twelve*

# NIHILISM, POLITICAL THEOLOGY, SECULARISATION: CARL SCHMITT

In contrast to the French culture, at least in thinkers such as Camus, Bataille and especially Cioran, who enjoy their nihilistic *spleen*, the same cannot be said of the thinkers on the other side of the Rhine. Certainly, the great German theorists of Ni chilism – Benn, Heidegger, Heidegger – have bent over backwards in their analysis of the nihilistic experience to such an extent that it has been held against them as a fault. In truth, their thinking is moved deep down by a desire to overcome, or at least to exorcise, the crisis and negativity of which this movement is an expression.

Worthy of mention in this regard is a figure who, together with the three just mentioned, has made a de cisive contribution to the understanding and theoretical elaboration of nihilism in our century: Cari Schmitt. In his work, a lucid investigation of modern and contemporary nihilism and the processes of secularisation and neutralisation that have produced it is carried out from the point of view of po litical philosophy.

vocated. An investigation that appears all the more disenchanted and unprejudiced the more fierce the aversion that Schmitt, in the name of a pro fession of Catholic-Gnostic faith, nurtures towards the sgregatory outcomes of secularisation. As is often the case with thinkers who vibrate with the power of the elemental, Schmitt has been much discussed and his theses have been the subject of exacerbated controversy. For some, he has personified a political decisionism that threatens the principles of parliamentarianism and democracy, i.e. the two pillars on which the political life of modern societies rests; for others, he has been the theorist of a strong state, politically capable of acting, i.e. of de-

cide. Some of his texts - from The *Concept of the Political (Der Begrz//des Po litischen,* 1 927) to The *Nomos of the Earth (Der Nomos der Erde,* 1 950) - constitute indispensable reference points for contemporary political philosophy.

Taking as his starting point the problem of today's crisis of state legitimacy, Schmitt notes that our situation, for those who wish to address this crisis, is characterised by the impracticability of traditional resources, i.e. the impossibility of having recourse to pre-political instances capable of giving foundation and legitimacy to state sovereignty. Ta li were in the past theology, worldviews and ideologies, now definitively in their twilight years. In the situation of political nihilism that characterises our age, it becomes crucial, in order to identify the foundation of power, to define the authentic subject of sovereignty, i.e. to establish 'who decides'. Now, legal positivism – on this point, Schmitt's great interlocutor and antagonist is Kelsen – identifies the state with the legal system of laws, in which, however, only how the set of norms functions is said, i.e. how decisions are to be made, but not who decides on this 'how', i.e. not who determines the functioning of the political-legal system and how this is to take place. The functioning of norms thus presupposes a si tuation of normality that has already been produced. But to understand how it is produced, the moment that precedes legal normality is decisive: the
"state of exception'. In it, since there are no norms yet, or no longer, in force, the conditions must be imposed for the norms to apply. For Schmitt, being sovereign means being 'the one who de cides in the state of exception' (precisely who is 'friendly' and who is 'ne mical'). The keystone of every legal system does not lie in a fundamental norm, but in an original decision that sets the le
and guarantees its effectiveness.

It is within this framework that the State, a typically modern form of the Political, must be conceived for Schmitt. The process of forming the le gitimacy and sovereignty of the state is inseparable from the phenomenon of the political nihilism that troubles its theoretical self-representation. Modernity is characterised by the gradual disappearance of the traditional theological foundation of legitimacy and the corresponding need to produce it autonomously*, etiamsi Deus non daretur*, i.e. through the 'fiction' of God's non-existence and the use in its stead of a rational argumentation independent of the dictates of theology. The traditional theological foundation is then progressively secularised and neutralised, in accordance with the principle already uttered by Alberico Gentile: *Silete, theologi, in munere alieno -'* The sacelli del-

theology are emptied and their content transferred to political thought, which, in order to give itself a foundation, resorts to reference frameworks that are substitutes for the theological one: the metaphysical one (17th century), the moral one (18th century), the economic one (19th century) and finally, in the 20th century, the technical one. But technology, insofar as it serves any end, produces the eradication of all reference and orientation, even that linked to the earth, which, in contrast to the sea, characterises for Schmitt the tradition of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*. Technique, which unifies and amalgamates everything, cannot actually constitute any foundation and order. It no longer recognises any national 'place'.

tural in which to put down roots. For Schmitt, this is the true condition of u-topia and nihilism – terms that, in the world uprooted by technology, are latently conjoined (Schmitt, 1 991a: 53) – that characterises contemporary e poca. In this situation, as the only prati cable criterion for an identification of the 'Political)) remains the stark opposition of 'friend and foe)) - where by enemy is not meant *the inimicus*, i.e. the one who harbours hostile feelings on a personal level, nor *the adversarius,* i.e. the adversary in general, but *the hostis,* the enemy "of the fatherland)), public, political, he who is simply "other)) and who in his irreducible otherness requires to be addressed in the appropriate disposition, the strategic-conflictual disposition of struggle.

But one would not truly understand Schmitt's theses if one did not square them within the horizon of the problem that constituted the guiding thread of his thought and haunted him to the very end: the struggle between Catholicism and Judaism over the interpretation of the meaning of universal history. For Schmitt, this conflict was not just a matter of chance but a vital problem. Modernity is for him the field of this great clash from which, with secularisation, the Jews would emerge victorious. Schmitt was convinced that the great Jewish thinkers of the 19th century had realised that in order to be victorious on the level of universal stock, the old Christian order of the world had to be eliminated – hence that secularisation and the disintegration of that order had to be promoted. Indeed, it was with them that the fundamental concepts of dissolution came into circulation: Marx, with his theory of capitalism, introduced the idea of the class struggle that demolished all social order; Freud, with psychoanalysis and the unconscious, dissolved the concepts of the soul and the person, the pivot of Christian anthropology; Einstein, with his theory of relativity, destroyed forever the anthropocentric image of the universe.

But the most fearsome theoretician of Judaism is Benjamin Disraeli, whose portrait Schmitt not surprisingly hung above his desk

in Dahlem's house in Berlin. According to Disraeli – who entrusts his thesis to the novel *Tancred, or The New Crusade* (1 847) - history is a conflict between races and there is one people, that of Israel, superior to the others and destined to assert itself. In the key sentence of the novel it is said: 'Christianity is Judaism for the people'. For Schmitt, this is an unprecedented statement that overturns two thousand years of history. If it were true, the Christian aeon would be tantamount to an error. More: Christianity would simply be the strategy employed by the Jews to get the better of other peoples. But Schmitt is convinced that history is proving Judaism right and for this very reason he is struck by Disraeli's thesis. Christian eschatology, based on original sin and man's redemption in the afterlife, is emerging as the losing interpretation of universal history. Winning is the Jewish one: humanity is on a progressive journey towards the future 'kingdom of peace', towards the 'New Jerusalem', far away in time but located in the hereafter. For Schmitt, it is clear that with modern secularisation, at the latest from the French Revolution onwards, European peoples have interpreted history in the sense of Judaism and that the Jewish idea of a universal principle encompassing all mankind has found its incipient realisation in the global era into which the modern world has effectively entered. From the point of view of the political theologian who sees Roman Catholicism as the *katéchon,* the force that holds back the coming of the Antichrist, this is tantamount to the victory of the Jewish elite that wants dissolution. Accordingly, one can understand the statement in *Ex captivitate salus* that Schmitt used to repeat: 'The enemy is the personification of our own problem' (Schmitt, 1987: 92 ).

It matters little, for the purposes of a historical and theoretical analysis of nihilism, that Schmitt – as testified by the diaries written in the years of crisis after the war, *Ex captivitate salus* and *Glossarium* - risks the crudity of these theses by inscribing them within the framework of a theological-esque interpretation of history, in respect of which he assumes the attitude of a "Christian Epimetheus'. It matters little, that is, that he simply presents himself as the one who shows the evils contained in Fan dora's vase, but who at the same time contemptuously condemns, in the spirit of Catholicism, the egological subjectivism and nihilism of modern and contemporary thought, behind which he glimpses the forces of Evil that can only be opposed by the 'force that holds back', the *katéchon* represented by the Roman Church. Little matter the poisons that Schmitt pours against modernity in the *Glossa rium*, declaring, for example, that the alleged */undamentum inconcussum* of the Cartesian *cogito* is a challenge to God of unparalleled arrogance; or that Spinoza, with his equara-

of God and Nature, has brought the Divine the most shameless offence ever uttered; or that Nietzsche, with his philosophy of the will to power, represents 'the culmination of the most miserable lack of taste and existential stupidity'. What is important is that this Epimetheus of our time did not fear that radical analysis that led him to uncover the vase of nihilism.

*Chapter Thirteen*

## NIHILISM, 'POSTHISTOIRE', END OF HISTORY

In the course of secularisation – the dynamics of which Cari Schmitt's work lays bare – the nihilistic neutralisation of values also attacks the understanding of history as the horizon of human action that arches between past and future along the progressive development of events.

In modern philosophies of history – born from the secularisation of sacred history motifs in Bossuet *(Discours sur l'histoire universelle,* 1681), Voltaire *(Essai sur l'histoire générale et sur !es moeurs et l'esprit des nations,* 1756), Condorcet *(Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, 1795 ) – an underlying polarity determines the tension that characterises the course of *res gestae:* the polarity between *history* and *utopia,* between *tradition* and *revolution.* But with the advent of the historicist mentality, i.e. the positivism of history that considers history not as a 'teacher of life' but as an object of scientific observation, the tension that history traditionally conveyed to action is reabsorbed. In the second of his *Untimely Considerations ( Un zeitgemiifle Betrachtungen*, 1 873 -76), with its famous title *On the Usefulness and Harm of History for Life ( Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie/ii r das Leben*, 1 874), Nietzsche foresaw the outcome to which the modern scientific understanding of history would lead. Prisoner of the historicist mentality, man wanders around like an idle tourist in the garden of history, paying a visit to all the beauties and curiosities it displays, but he himself becomes incapable of historical action: he behaves as a detached observer, indifferent to tradition and utopia, in accordance with that *tout comprendre* which is at the same time a *tout pardonner* and which deprives him of the power to decide, i.e. to act. In the realisation of the mo-

dernity – instead of acting, through the critical assimilation of *tradition,* as a horizon and reservoir from which to draw content and motives for planning the future without ambiguity – the weight of the historiographic understanding of history ends up suffocating and paralysing action.
Relativism and scepticism, pessimism and nihilism are moments on the path towards the exhaustion of history understood as the linear course of magnificent fates and progressions.

Confirming this process are crepuscular reflections and beliefs that increase the feeling that we have reached an irreversible final stage. The idea of an 'end of history)) and a 'posthistoire)) is explicitly theorised. The "end of all things")), which the Enlightenment philosopher Kant envisaged as the final meaning of history to which humanity's constant progress towards the best would lead, has become a mere "agony of the end")), the suffocating acknowledgement of the irreversibility of the state reached, in today's debate on the "posthistoire")) and the end of history.

But what is meant by 'posthistoire))? The meaning of the expression obviously depends on the idea of history that one wants to have left behind. In the current debate, it has been introduced and used as a critical diagnosis of the present: it is meant to indicate the exit from history as linear progress and the entry into a dimension where what was history – evolution, development, progress according to the unstoppable and irreversible course of time – has been put out of action by the stagnation to which historical events have led. Intellectuals from the right and left have used the concept of 'posthistoire)) filling it with different contents respectively. It is especially worth mentioning here two thinkers who, independently of each other, have both made use of this concept: Alexandre Kojève and Arnold Gehlen.

Kojève, a native of Moscow, had dealt with Russian messiani smo in his youth. His doctoral thesis, presented in Heidelberg with Ja spers, was on Solov'ev's philosophy of religion. In Paris, where he had emigrated, he had had contact with Berdiaev. The latter, especially in *Le sens de l'histoire* (1 92 3) and *Essai de métaphysique eschatologi que* (1 94 1), had already developed against the optimism of progress and the
"divinisation of the future)) the motif of the "end of history)), placing it in the framework of a millenarian eschatology. Kojève, in the above-mentioned seminars on the *Phenomenology of the Spirit,* is also fascinated by the thesis of the "end of history)), but he elaborates on it – starting from his own reading of the Hegelian dialectic of servant and lord and from a singular interpretation of the figure of Napoleon – in an entirely original Marxist perspective.

The thesis, in short, is this: history ends, *in principle,* with Napoleon's victory at Jena. This event – whose importance Hegel im mediately grasps when he writes to Niethammer that he saw in the victor of Jena 'the soul of the world concentrated in a single point'– - symbolises for Kojève the worldwide affirmation of the principles of the French Revolution: freedom and equality as the foundations of the modern egalitarian and democratic state. It is precisely with this form of state, which Kojève calls the *État universel et homogène, that* history is fulfilled and ends. In the universal and homogeneous state, the deadly conflict between servant and lord, i.e. the struggle for recognition, reaches its fulfilment, all previous conflicts and contradictions are reconciled, freedom and equality are realised, and the possibilities of history reach their saturation point. Whether this end of history, in the universal and homogeneous state, is to be regarded simply as a *possibility* or as a *reality of/act*, is a question that Kojève dodged now and again with irony and now with patience, and can be left aside here. It can only be recalled that the second of the two alternatives has recently been taken up and developed by Francis Fukuyama, who, inspired by Kojève, has disseminated a cruder, liberal-inspired ver sion of the thesis of the end of history. Quite different is the perspective of Arnold Gehlen. In essays published in the 1950s and 1960s, he introduced the concept of the end of history.

'posthistoire' and 'the end of history' in the German cultural area, ela borando in an essentially sociological key and in a political colouration that – unlike Kojève's Marxist one – declares itself conservative. On the basis of the historical-terminological indications provided in Hendrik de Man's book *Massication and Cultural Decadence ( Vermassung und Kulturverfall,* 1 95 1), another singular figure of 'con

revolutionary servant', Gehlen states that the concept of 'posthi stoire' was first used by the French mathematician and economist Anton-Augustin Cournot (1801-1 87 7). The latter hypothesises 'a final state in which history will, so to speak, enter into a stasis, since, with respect to the smooth running of the wheels of administration and industry, it will henceforth have nothing but dysfunctions. The future so cial state that will take over, governed by a universal administration that will take care of its own dysfunctions, will not in principle be condemned to death, but it is possible to imagine it in time spans that extend at will' (Gehlen, 1 975: 126).

For Gehlen, this 'post-historical' dimension already partially connotes our present and will completely determine the civilisation of the future: the dynamics of technological-industrial development, however much it may be, will be the result of the 'post-historical' dimension.

that alternating accelerations and decelerations, progress and regressions, has led to a 'state of perpetual motility' that reproduces and repeats itself without end. There is then a 'stasis of history' in which society and culture 'crystallise'. This is the situation Gehlen calls 'posthi stoire)) or - as he explicitly says in one of his last essays – 'fi of history)):

From 1954 onwards, referring back to Cournot, we have called the state so ragged 'posthistoire)). There will be a suction into the future in which idea motives will take a back seat, while rapidly ageing inventions will be replaced by new ones, and all this within the long-standing framework o f a continuous growth of mankind with an increasing standard of living. "The future sentiment of mankind)), said Gottfried Benn, "will not be that of development, but that of incessant movement)) (Gehlen, 1975: 65 ).

Gehlen reiterates the thesis of 'posthistoire)) on several occasions – spe cialy in the essays *The Secularisation of Progress (Die Siikularisie rung des Fortschritts*, 1 967 ) and *End of History? (Ende der Geschichte?,* 1 97 4) – and supplements it with considerations on the stagnation of mon dial politics. As decisive factors for the emergence of this phenomenon, the establishment of the balance between the two superpowers and, above all, the emergence of the planetary empire of technological civilisation are mentioned:

total mobilisation elevated to a permanent state. What this means above all is the disappearance of the possibility of the new and the different, the fact that technological-industrial civilisation has now reached a point of no return and has assumed the character of irreversibility. There is no longer any force – not knowledge, not philosophy, not religion, not art – capable of producing a new image of the world. The civilisation of science and technology has reached what – in an essay of the same name from 1961 – Gehlen calls *cultural crystallisation.*

As the oxygen of history and tradition dies out, so does the fire of utopia. The tension between being and what ought to be – which, in the forms of modern secularisation, had been the driving motive of human action in history, which Kant had summarised as the foundation of the hope that mankind was in constant progress towards the best, and which Hegel, while taming it in the identity of reality and rationality, still kept burning in the movement of the life of the spirit – today disappears and is no longer there. Marxi's volcanoes extinguished tion, dismantled the last strongholds of utopian thought, takes pie

The conviction that the contents of the happy life can no longer be anticipated, not even in a counterfactual description. It has vanished

the belief in a happy ending to history, nor do we venture any more philosophies of history, except on the level of esoteric knowledge. The nihilism of contemporary culture is not only a crisis of values and the absence of shared beliefs: it is also the fact that human action no longer flares up between the two opposing poles of tradition and revolution, but is awakened in the narrow perspective of the 'here and now'. Neither history nor happening, but the punctiformity of the present moment is the horizon for the a gire of contemporary man. Subjectivity, the royal principle of modern thought, is today weakened, deconstructed, and incapable of bearing the weight of the historical arc that stretches between history and utopia. Its projec tuality flattens out in the fruition and enjoyment of the pre sent. This is the problem: we want the freest and most complete realisation of the individual, and we want it now; we want the greatest possible happiness, and we want it today; we want the most complete and most free realisation of the individual, and we want it now; we want the most complete realisation of the individual, and we want it now.
tion of all social problems, but not one day in the future, rather today or tomorrow or the day after tomorrow at the latest.

Thus, at the 'end of history' or in the 'post-historical' age, in the extinguished ashes of utopia, intelligence today appears incapable of producing symbolic experiences susceptible of consensus and risks being reduced to a cynical intelligence, which, in order to erase the discomfort of the loss of centres of gravity, is pleased and intoxicated by the here and now, by t h e present in its most punctiform and ephemeral actuality, by meaning in its most immeasurable consummation. This too is nihilism.

*Chapter Fourteen*

# NIHILISM IN ITALY

For a series of reasons that cannot be examined here, Italian philosophical culture has been particularly sensitive in capturing the manifestations of nihilism and attempting a theoretical elaboration. To begin with, we should recall a circumstance overlooked in histories of nihilism, namely that very ancient occurrences of the term are attested in the Italian language (cf. Battaglia, 1981: 423-24).

It is used incidentally by Pasquale Galluppi in *Con philosophical considerations on transcendental idealism and absolute rationalism* published a year before his death, in 1845, in which Zeno of Elea's position, which denies the movement by refutation, is mentioned and called 'nihilism' (Galluppi, 1845: 204). The term is also found more or less in the same years in Carlo Cattaneo, who also makes sporadic use of it, but in a more generic and derogatory sense. One occurrence is enough, by way of example, to get an idea. Cattaneo writes in his typical polemical style:

> Having made philosophy the solace of imbeciles and the art of scepticism and nihilism, one cannot see how knowledge of the world could flourish (Cattaneo, 1960: I, 335).

But it is above all Francesco De Sanctis who employs the concept of nihilism to qualify Leopardi's philosophical position and his thematisation of nothingness. In order to highlight the contradiction between his rootedness in Enlightenment rationalism, on the one hand, and his poetic yearning for nothingness, on the other, De Sanctis states:

> His weak and split will does not allow him to come to a stable conclusion, to philosophical coherence, suspended and split between an *absolute* and desperate *nihilism* and individual and humanitarian vel leities (De Sanctis, 1960: 286).

But beyond these historical-terminological occurrences, it is on a theoretical level that Italian culture has made important contributions to the analysis of nihilism. In the 1970s and 1980s of our century, there was a veritable efflorescence of nihilistic literature, which blossomed in conjunction with the fortunes of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's thought. There was a wide-ranging debate in which the need for a philosophical critique of current affairs was recognisable and in which thinkers with different approaches such as Pareyson and Caracciolo intervened,

Severino, Sini, Vitiello, Ruggenini, Vattimo, Givone, Cacciari, to name but a few.

The merit of bringing attention to nihilism as a horizon for a critical diagnosis of the present, and of providing an initial philosophical elaboration of it, has been that of thinkers such as Alberto Caracciolo and Luigi Parey son and their respective schools. In the works of both, albeit from different theoretical perspectives and with different emphases, the analysis of nihilism occupies a central position. Nihilism is embraced by both of them as a decisive experience of our century. It must therefore be thought through to the end, in all its manifestations and consequences, in the conviction, however, that the theoretical assimilation of the phenomenon opens the way to overcoming it. This latter requirement explains the constant connection – in both Pareyson and Caracciolo – with the problem of the sacred and the religious, in which a way out of the nihilistic outcomes of modernity is glimpsed.

From the Pareyson school, however, also came an opposite interpretation of nihilism, which ended up setting the tone for the debate: that of Gianni Vattimo. Vattimo did not reject nihilism as a malaise of our culture, but argued, on the contrary, that the unease it provokes in contemporary consciousness stems from the fact that it is not yet sufficiently nihilistic, that it has not yet renounced the will to impose meaning on things, that it does not yet know how to accept them in their naked and raw becoming. Vattimo has therefore elected nihilistic awareness, understood in this way, as the horizon of his thought and has not hesitated to profess to be an apologist for nihilism.

He therefore declared his 'nihilistic vocation' and consistently hailed the nihilistic phenomena of contempo ranean culture as positive events. Intervening in this sense in the pro-sophistic debate – on topics such as the crisis of dialectical thought *(The Adventures of the dzf/erence*, 1980), the death of the subject *(Beyond the Subject,* 1981), the postmodern *(The End of Modernity,* 1985) – he has progressively focused on a philosophical perspective defined as 'de bole>) (The *Weak Thought*, 1983). In this programme, incorporating

way the critique and overcoming of the metaphysics theorised by Nietz sche and Heidegger, he affirmed the need to renounce the strong cate gories of the Western philosophical tradition and developed a

A "weak ontology" that intends to recognise and accept becoming in its facticity, without giving it a meaning that transcends it and without imposing strong forms, categories or interpretative schemes that would inevitably end up inhibiting its flow. In Vattimo's opinion, it is precisely this inflexibility that characterises metaphysics, which, with its search for a 'transcendent' explanation of everything that is, represents an excessive defensive reaction, the index of a way of thinking that cannot tolerate the unpredictable nature of becoming. Against this, Vattimo advocates a philosophical attitude that neither removes nor clumsily attempts to bring back to unity the fragmentation of reality, the irreducible diversity of language games and forms of knowledge, nor suffers all this as an inevitable circumstance, but accepts it as an essential characteristic of the contemporary world.

Because of this peculiar trait, 'weak thought' is certainly in tune with the programmatic intentions of postmodern culture. In it, the analysis of the dissolution of traditional categories is not accompanied – as in the early twentieth-century philosophies of the crisis– - by a feeling of nostalgia for the lost unity and wholeness, but greets di versification and fragmentation, hence plurality and instability, as intrinsic aspects of reality to be recognised as such in their positive character, without claiming to lead them back to unity and strong hierarchies constructed f r o m above or from outside. Consequently, Vattimo declared the need to assert a paradigm of weak, paralo gical rationality, not subordinating and hierarchising but paratactic, not vertical but transversal, i.e. one that is intrinsically differentiated and thus cut and adapted to the respective object fields of application. Along the lines of the Wittgensteinian model of the plurality of language games, he noted and declared the positive character of the plurality of forms of knowledge, of possibilities of action, of life worlds, emphasising from this plurality not the possibility of coordination and standardisation, but the potential for fragmentation, conflictuality and even incommensurability. This led to the theorisation of cultural operations, attitudes and practices of rupture, such as the 'fragmentation' and 'regionalisation' of knowledge, 'decanonisation', i.e. the abandonment of traditional 'canons', and 'hybridisation', i.e. the contamination of genres (cf. Welsch, 1987).

This was stated by claiming a ni-

chylistics. If, as weak thought would have it, one accepts the becoming of things with submissiveness, without over-interpreting or transcending it, then one can disentangle gloomy and nostalgic nihilism – as happens when one still cultivates the memory and nostalgia of lost values - and with Nietzsche, the possibility opens up of a "joyful" nihilism that intends to be closer to human finitude, to its joys and sufferings, than metaphysics. This position, with its rejection of cultural pessimism, is clearly different from other interpretations of nihilism, including Pareyson's and Sergio Givone's, in which a close link between nihilism and cultural pessimism is revealed.

and problem of evil (cf. Pareyson, 1993 , 1 995 ; Givone, 1984, 1 988). But the interpretation of nihilism that stands out in the panorama of Italian philosophy for its originality and systematicity is that of Emanuele Se verino. Trained at the Catholic University of Milan with Gustavo Bontadini – who rejected the label of 'neo-scholasticism' to claim that of 'classical metaphysics' – Severino confronted himself from his earliest me works with the metaphysical problem: how is the being of w h a t becomes to be understood and explained? The presence of this problem, reproduced by Bontadini, can be felt in Severino's early writings: *Heidegger e ilproblema della metafisica* (1 950), which contains an analysis of the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics as set out in the book on Kant and in the essays of 1 929, and the *Note sul problematicismo italiano* (1 950), in which critical studies on Ugo Spirito, Nicola Abbagnano and Antonio Banfi are collected. In relation to Bon tadini's revival of classical metaphysics, it is possible to better grasp both the crux of Severini's thought and the originality of his position.

First of all, it should be made clear that Bontadini's revival was not a restoration operation. Beyond the reference to the Greek paradigm, it aimed at defining the logical-anthological structure of metaphysics in order to vindicate its necessity against the modern dominance of gnoseolgy. Interesting in our context is the path Bontadini followed to arrive at this. He started out from an interpretation of modern philosophy as 'gnoseologism', i.e. as a speculative approach in which, as the transcendence of being with respect to thought is naturalistically presupposed, being is not immediately apparent. Knowledge is then taken as the starting point and its primacy in 'gnoseology' is theorised. Given the heterogeneity and surplus of being with respect to knowing, philosophies with a gnoseological taxation cannot ground experience, i.e. the manifestation of being in the act of knowing, but must presuppose it as given. They generally end up surreptitiously interpreting it as

receptivity or as construction: receptivity in relation to a being given to it from outside, construction on the basis of an internal principle. In the idea lism, modern gnoseologism reaches its extreme formulation but also its resolution. Indeed, the rethinking of the concept of experience that it imposes reopens the possibility of metaphysics, which, in its classical structure, i.e. in its essentiality, is nothing other than the coherent philosophical explanation of the being of what becomes. Three are the components and at the same time the steps of the metaphysical argument: experience, the principle of non-contradiction, and the idea of what is 'other' or 'further' than experience.

Now, the first definition of the structure of metaphysics is given by Greek thought, in particular by Parmenides, who first formulated the principle of non-contradiction in its ontological valence. By saying that being is and it is impossible for it not to be, and that non-being is not and it is impossible for it to be, he establishes the principle – which Bontadini does pro prio – according to which being cannot and can never be counted from non-being. If one strictly adheres to such a principle, the reality of becoming that immediate experience attests to us, and which now is and now is not, appears contradictory: becoming presents itself as that being whose reality is mixed with non-being. But since contradiction cannot be admitted, one must then think that the being of becoming, which appears limited by non-being, does not exhaust the totality of being. By means of a 'metempirical inference' one must then think of the incontrovertible reality of an absolute being that is not limited by becoming: such is the reality of divine being.

In his early speculative works, especially in The *Oriental Structure*
*ginaria* (1958), Severino takes up and radicalises this approach through the rigorous analysis of the logical-ontological structure of absolute and incontrovertible being and the incontrovertible thought, *epistéme,* that corresponds to it. Now, according to Severino, this thought is *structure,* i.e. the original relation of "logical immediacy" and "phenomenological immediacy", and this relation is the appearance of the "eternity" of being as being, i.e. of every being. Eternity, i.e. the impossibility of non-being, is not, however, simply a property of pure being, as in Parrnenides, or of a metaphysical-theoretical-logical principle, but is the essential predicate of the totality of the differences of the being. In the *Original Structure*, Severino intends to show that the structure of origin is that which authentically possesses the property that Aristotelé attributes to the principle of non-contradiction: that of being the incontrovertible, that which is not contradictory.
which cannot not be because its negation also presupposes it.

Taking Bontadini's teaching as his starting point, Severino thus arrived at unexpected and uncomfortable conclusions, which came to light above all in the essay *Ritornare a Parmenide (Returning to Parmenides),* originally published in the Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica (56, 1964, pp. 13 7- 175, with a *Postscript*, ibid., 57, 1965, pp. 559-618) and later included in *Essenza del nichilismo* (1972). While in fact Bontadini inferred from the contradictory nature of becoming, by virtue of the principle of non-contradiction, the existence of a transcendent being that does not become, Severino drew from the same starting point an opposite conclusion: if becoming is contradictory, it is necessary to deny its reality, but not in order to postulate a transcendent principle that is absolutely different from becoming.
come itself, but to recognise that all that is, since it cannot be admitted as becoming, on pain of contradiction, must then be thought of as eternal and necessary.

Developed with coherence and rigour, this position became increasingly clearer for what it was, namely as a "neo-Parmenidean" anthropology, which, because of the pulpit from which it was professed and the personality of its professors, could not fail to arouse amazement, then scandal, then anathema. It was officially condemned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as atheistic spe culation, irreconcilable with the contents of revelation and the teaching of the Catholic Church. Severinus responded to the condemnation with his *Answer to the Church* (cf. Severinus, 1 982: 3 17 -87), but left the Catholic University and moved, followed by his students, to the Uni versity of Venice.

Following this important event, Severino continued to unravel in an increasingly rigorous and radical manner the premises from which he had started, gradually giving more and more shape to his own
'neo-Parmenideism'. Not only that. On the basis of this original conception, he also developed a diagnosis of civilisation with temporary and it is in this context that the category of 'nihilism', used as a critical analysis, became central for him. His insistence on nihilism and technology as the hallmarks of the current world epoch has led to his analysis being associated with Heidegger's famous thesis about the fulfilment of metaphysics in nihilism and the essence of modern technology, but it must be said that Severino arises in completely different terms from Heidegger. In addition to *Es*
*without nihilism,* the texts in which these motifs are developed
are: *The Inhabitants of Time,* especially interesting for its analysis of Christianity, Marxism and technology as fundamental forms of Western nihilism; *Techne. The roots of violence* (1 979), de-

dicated to the examination of the different manifestations of the uprootedness of contemporary e poca. His Adelphian production follows: *Law and Ca so* ( 1979), The *Missed Patricide* (1985 ), *The Fundamental Tendency of Our Time* (1988) , *Beyond Language* (1 992) and above all *Destiny of Necessity* (Milan 1980), *The Yoke* (1989) and *Taut6tes* (1995 ), in which the vast speculative design of his first systematic works is taken up again, with the intention of exposing in an even more rigorous manner, in alternation with the nihilistic alienation of the West, the structure of the truth of being from the pure point of view of the necessity of that truth. And with regard to the problem of nihilism and technology, the interpretation of Leopardi, to whom *the* book *Ilnul la e la poesia* is dedicated, is also important. *At the End of the Age of Technique: Leopardi* (1990).

Now, although in some texts, especially in the long *Introdu ions* written for the new edition ( 1 981) of the *Original Structure* and re cently in *Taut6tes*, alludes to a certain evolution of it, Severinus' thought lends itself to being considered as a monolithic and unitary block. We can illustrate here, at least briefly, the two components that constitute its essential core: the examination of the fundamental structure of the West as the history of the forgotten ni chilism of being, and the theoretical analysis of the ne cessary and incontrovertible structure of being in its radical and absolute dif ference from nothingness.

For Severino, the thinking and acting of Western humanity have their deepest metaphysical motivation in an unconscious structure. It is located at a more radical anthological level than the structures of historical occurrence identified by Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and psychoanalysis. This unconscious structure can be traced back, in its ex noxiousness, to the will that the entity be nothing. And this nihilistic will is attributed to all forms and phases of Western thought, in the mi sura in which what they all have in common is the belief in becoming, that is, the belief that all things stand and flow in time. The belief that 'everything flows and nothing remains' is not only Heraclitus' but of the entire West. And why should this belief amount to the will that things are nothing? Simply because of this: because to think that things are in time, that they are born and die, that they come out of nothing and return to nothing, is to think that they, although being entities, have been nothing in the past and will be nothing again in the future. But to believe this is to think it possible that (at some time in the past or future) the entity is nothing. When we think and say that things are in time, that past things are not (any more) and future things are not (yet), we think and say that

entity is nothing, and we are therefore, according to Severino, nihilists in an essential sense. But to say that being is nothing is contradictory. Thus Western man, in his nihilism, rests on the inconsistent foundation of a contradiction. Nevertheless, there is no way to remove him from his belief in the reality of becoming, from thinking and acting as if being came from nothing and returned to it, as if being was nothing. Placing the entity in time – time being interpreted as the element that separates (on the basis of the reconduction of *tempus* to gre co *témnein* and *chr6nos* a *krinein)* - western man separates him from the being and thinks of it as non-being, as nothing, forgetting the admonition of Parmenides who says: "Thou shalt not separate being from being". sere' (fr. 4).

This is the basic contradiction in which the West consciously persists to the extent that it believes in the existence of the to come. But let us listen to Severino's argument as he formulates it:

For metaphysics, things 'are'. Their 'being' is their not being a nothing. Insofar as they are, they are called 'entities)) or 'beings)). But the entity, *as such,* is that which may not be: either in the sense that it could have been or may not be, or in the sense that it begins and ends (was not and is no longer). Metaphysics is the allowance for the non-being of entity. By affirming that being is not - by consenting to the non-existence of being - it affirms that non-being is nothing. The fundamental thought of metaphysics is that being, *as such,* is nothing (Severino, 1 982: 1 95 ).

And elsewhere:

We say: 'things past and things to come are nothing)). What could be more unquestionable? But in this unquestionable conviction of ours we mean something different from the statement: 'nothing is nothing)); that is, it is not *of* nothingness that we mean that it is nothing, but it is *of things past,* or *of things to come*, that is, of that whose meaning is not identical with the meaning <<nothing)). But that whose meaning is not identical with the meaning <<nothing)) is not a nothing. Of the city of Hiroshima we say that it has become nothing. But Hiroshima does not mean 'nothing)), that is, it is not a nothing. Hiroshima, of which we say that it is now a 'nothing'), is not a nothing. We therefore think that what is *not* a nothing is a nothing. The past and the future are the time in which things, that which is not a nothing, is a nothing. If they were to tell us that the past and the future are the time in which the circle is square, we would be quite ready to retort that there can be no time in which this absurd identification of the circle and the square is realised. But this sensitivity to the absurd (…) does not prevent us from thinking instead of a time in which the thing, that which is not a nothing, is nothing and not a square.

prevents us from living and acting in accordance with this thought. We think and live things as if they were nothing. For European civilisation, things are nothing: the sense of the thing, which guides the history of the West, is the nihilism of things. The essence of European civilisation is nihilism, since the fundamental sense of nihilism is the rendering of things as nothing, the persuasion that the entity is nothing, and it is acting guided and established by this persuasion (Severino, 1978: 20).

From Parmenides onwards, the West remains for Severinus within the horizon of such nihilism. Indeed, nihilistic would be all civilisations, all peoples and religions, social institutions, masses and individuals that remain bound to the belief in becoming. In Western civilisation, with technology, this belief would reach its highest form and its most profound and inestimable diffusion. Indeed, where not only human thought, but also human action is guided by the nihilistic conviction that things are nothing in the sense that they can be fabricated and destroyed, that is to say, extracted from nothing and brought back into nothing, Ni chilism reaches its highest degree of reality. But technology is just that, since it must assume that things can be made (from nothing) and destroyed (in nothing) according to one's liking. And whereas at one time the task of creating and destroying things was entrusted to God, in the contemporary era technology takes on this divine prerogative: if theology is the first form of technology, then technology is the last form of theology. The consistent conclusion is:

God and modern technology are the two fundamental expressions of metaphysical nichi lism (Severino, 1982: 197).

On the basis of this determination of nihilism Severino constructs his critical diagnosis of the contemporary world and the values it produces. Inhabiting time, believing in becoming and thus in the li berty of things to come and go from nothing, implies the consummation and demise of all those that Severino calls the 'immutables' of the West. Such are the figures, forms, ideals and values through which Western thought attempts to capture and stabilise becoming in its unpredictable complexity. In sum, time implies the fall of all the gods and idols produced by history: the God of Christianity as well as the gods of other religions, the capitalist organisation of labour like Marxism, the various forms of philosophical thought from Plato to Husserl. And the demise of the immutable is not only a sociological-cultural process, but has its cause in the metaphysical-nihilistic choice for becoming.

In this regard, keeping in mind the precise sense in which Severino maintains that Western civilisation is nihilistic and the terms in which he criticises its manifestations, it must be said that much of the attention his work has attracted is based on a misunderstanding. It consists in believing that he speaks of nihilism in the common philosophical sense of the term, i.e. as a cultural phenomenon that is interesting to study for some, worrying for others, and indifferent for others. But the sense in which nihilism is for some worrying and for others interesting or indifferent is quite different from what Severino means.

On the basis of the identification of the unconscious structure of the West, Severinus proposes an alternative to the path of night followed so far. It is represented by the way of day of which Parmenides speaks, and which with systematises in recognising the necessity that being is and cannot not be, and that nothing is not and cannot be. Severinus, however, does not want a sem
plete return to Parmenides, as one might think and as has actually been thought. Instead, it is necessary to repeat the 'parricide' by which Plato believes he is rid of Parmenides and deludes himself into saving the
world of phenomena. In the repetition of the 'parricide', the differences are finally brought back into being: no longer isolated from it – as happens in Parmenides, in Plato, in the entire history of the West – they then appear in their eternity. The sense of their becoming therefore also radically changes, which is no longer to be understood as leaving nothingness and returning to it, but as the appearance and disappearance of the eternal. If we allow this necessary and questionable structure to come to light in our thinking and speaking, then the Ni chilistic belief in the becoming of entities, that is, the obstinacy of wanting to live in time, i.e. outside of necessity, and of wanting to separate the entity from its being, will appear – this is the Severinian thesis – as the most profound alienation, as the most radical and tenacious evil of any original sin, of any economic or psychological error. Here is how Severin himself summarises this proposal of his in a significant passage from *Essence of Nihilism:*

In order to reawaken the truth of being, which has been asleep in Western thought since the day of its birth, one must still penetrate the meaning of this simple and great thought: that being is and is not allowed not to be. Its reawakening certainly constitutes the greatest danger for the long winter of reason, which sees its oldest habits disrupted and feels a new and most essential task proposed to it. If one is able, one must stifle this thought before it comes to bloom, because otherwise it is de-

stined, he alone, to have the right to flourish. Indeed, he pushes along a path, from which it is no longer possible to turn back: if of being (of every, of all being) it cannot be thought that it is not, then of being (of every, of all being) it cannot be thought that it becomes, because, in becoming, it would not be – that is, it would not be before its birth and after its corruption. So all being is immutable. It does not come out of nothingness and does not return to nothingness. It is eternal (Se verino, 1982: 69).

In *Destiny of Necessity*, western nihilism is analysed in its sedimentation in the structure of Indo-European languages and in the western way of understanding action starting with Aristotle. Here, too, Severino traces the multiple manifestations of nihilism back to a single root, the belief in becoming, i.e. the contradictory conviction that being is nothing, and again explains how the Western decision to separate being from being, i.e. from the destiny of necessity, in order to subject it to human will, has deeply de fined the course of Western history up to the present day. And once again Severino intends to show that the West represents but one of the two coursers that drag the happening of the earth in two opposite directions: it is the visible courser, the one guided by the will to power; the other courser, invisible in the horizon of moral appearances, lets itself be guided instead by the <<Will to Destiny>>, and precisely by the will of that destiny of necessity to which Severino's thought intends to bear witness.

It goes without saying that this position represents an unparalleled provocation not only for common sense, but also for contemporary thought. Everywhere today, there is a defensive attitude on the part of philosophy, which is concerned with safeguarding its legitimacy and disciplinary consistency on two fronts, i.e. both against the rationality of science and technology and against myth and religion. This defensive attitude has led to the abandonment of claims to absoluteness and the search for paradigms of philosophical rationality that are either partial, limited to specific fields of reference and application, as in the case of so-called practical rationality, or more debo lished, i.e. with circumscribed or even zero claims to validity. Well, against these predominant tendencies, Severino not only claims a
strong cognitive role to philosophical discourse, but even argues that it must have the character of *incontrovertibility*. It must be the logical locus of the manifestation of the anthological structure of the necessity of being, which is that which is and cannot not be, in its radical difference from nothingness as that which is not and can never be.

It is not surprising, therefore, that his writings have been attacked on all sides, even if the vehemence of the attacks detracts from the general recognition of the coherence with which he has been able to develop his philosophical discourse. Naturally, the criticisms that have worried Severino have not been those that have limited themselves to
polemics with him, but rather those that, by getting to the heart of his ar gomentations, aimed to unhinge the neo
Parmenides. This was especially the case with the criticism levelled at Severinus by his teacher Gustavo Bontadini, by Cornelio Fabro and by Enrico Berti – the latter from an Aristotelian point of view, thus making the case for that plurivocentric conception of being that represents the most powerful and dangerous antithesis to the univocentric conception Severino refers to. Severino also devoted much attention to Lucio Colletti's objections, especially in relation to the problem of contradiction.

In lieu of an examination of these various critiques, allow me here only a brief point to make in order to understand Severino's thought critically, especially in view of the developments contained in *De stino della necessità, in Il Giogo* and in *Taut6tes,* all works that radicalise the position developed in *Original Structure* and in *Essenza del nichilismo,* taking up the point of view of necessity even more rigorously. It is clear that for Severino, the truths of reason and the fundamental principles that govern them, the principle of identity and the principle of non-contradiction, not only have anthological value but also represent the structure of the Absolute. In short, thought, in its logical structure, reflects the immutable structure of being in its uncontroversial necessity. Therefore thought, in its implementation by
fect, transposes man beyond the phenomenological horizon of finite knowledge and elevates him to the point of view of the Absolute. Bearing this in mind, it is possible to understand the sense of Severin's negation of becoming: in the horizon of the Absolute, that is *sub specie aeternitatis*, becoming is resolved in the already given and eternal movable "sequence" of all its infinite moments; only from the point of view of a finite mind, that is *sub specie temporis,* these infinite moments, not recognised in their eternal connection, appear from time to time in their flowing and in their flowing, generating the appearance of becoming. This is why the negation of time and becoming has taken on, from *Destiny of Necessity* onwards, a so to speak "Spinozistic" connotation – even if, obviously, the severinia na determination of being has nothing to do with Spinoza's metaphysical presupposition of substance. In this sense, the speculative operation that Se verino performs basically consists in this: in bringing fi-

losophical, through the recognition of the logical-anthological necessity that comes to light in the rational structure that even a finite mind can recognise, to that "point of view" from which knowledge itself is no longer the point of view of finiteness, but is the manifestation of the logical-anthological necessity of the Absolute, of God himself. Severino wants to elevate human existence to that "point of view" that allows him to look beyond the circle of appearance, towards Necessity itself and thus transcend nihilism.

Naturally, many problems remain open, especially, to name the one with which I think the decisive pages of *Destiny of Necessity* and *Taut6tes* grapple, the difficulty of mediating between the whole of being and the contents of appearing, between being and entities, between the co
infinite and finite science, between thought and experience, between logi c and phenomenology. This is a fundamental question with which all forms of thinking about the Absolute have always had to contend.

This is a problem because - as Aristotle showed - it is precisely the assumption of the principle of non-contradiction in its anthological scope that requires the recognition of the multiple and diverse determinations of being (which Severin admits in fact). This poses a problem because – as Aristotle showed – it is precisely the assumption of the principle of non-contradiction in its anthological scope that makes it necessary to recognise the multiple and diverse determinations of being (which Severinus actually admits as eternal). But then: how is *it* possible to *say different without denying*, i.e. without saying 'this is not that' or 'that is not this'? That is, without saying that 'that', which is being, is not 'this', which is also being?

so entity? So without saying that something that is is not ente, i.e. that en te is non-entity, i.e. nothing?

It is clear at this point that the showdown must be made with Aristotle, since he is the very thinker who was the first to show how the assumption of the principle of non-contradiction implies the recognition of the plurality of meanings of being and therefore the rejection of the univocal conception of being of which the Parmenian conception is the first rigorous formulation. Vice versa, accepting the latter, one is forced not only to deny becoming, as Severinus actually does, but also to remove differences, which Severinus does not admit. Now, while in his revival of Parmenides Severino had good play in denying becoming and time by declaring them as forms of appearing, the problem of explaining and telling differences and determinations *without contradiction* still remains open; for in order to do so – within the horizon of a univocistic conception of the -

being, within which the copula 'is' is always and only employed in the meaning of 'is identical', indeed, of 'is eternally identical',
therefore in the sense of the essential preaching of identity – one must di re differences *without using negation.* This is what Severinus tries to do in *Taut6tes.*

*Chapter Fifteen*

# BEYOND NIHILISM?

Since it has had such a tense hold on our century, it is safe to assume that nihilism represents more than just a current in contemporary thought or a sombre occurrence of its intellectual avant-garde. One does not have to be a Nietzschean to recognise that its ghost lurks almost everywhere in the culture of our time. Nor does one have to go so far as to think, with Hei degger, that nihilism is the very occurrence of Western history, to recognise that 'those who have not experienced for themselves the enormous po tence of nothingness and have not been tempted by it know very little about our epoch' Uunger – Heidegger, 1989: 1 04 ).

Today, nihilism – a word that until recently was reserved for a few *elites* – is the expression of a deep malaise in our culture: on a socio-historical level, it overlaps with the processes of seco larisation and rationalisation, and hence of disenchantment and shattering of our image of the world, and on a philosophical level, it has led to the corruption of faiths and the spread of relativism and scepticism with regard to worldviews and ultimate values. And whichever attitude one takes towards it, of acceptance or rejection, anyone can see how much history has
filled nihilism "with substance, with lived life, with actions and pains" Uunger – Heidegger, 1989: 49) .

Having in this sense touched a nerve point in the critical consciousness and cultural self-representation of our time, nihilism has provoked reactions and attempts to overcome it that are just as de finite. Especially on the level of morality and ethics, efforts to overcome our nihilistic condition and the evils that result from it are now swarming (cf. Reale 1995; Scalfari 1995; Zecchi, 1993).

Yet precisely on a moral and ethical level, the observation made by sociologist Niklas Luhmann applies today more than ever: *Paradigm lost.* We have lost the traditional paradigms for orienting ourselves. And this va ration of John Milton's famous title applies in a twofold sense: both at the level of foundation and application, both in the theoretical and practical-applicative dimension (cf. Luhmann, 1 990).

Of course, there is undeniably a widespread demand for eti ca today. This should come as no great surprise. With a stoic look at modernity – to which Luhmann invites us – one can see that from the invention of the printing press onwards, in the last decades of each century of the New Age, the demands for ethics return with almost astronomical regularity.

l) Towards the end of the 16th century, with Justus Lipsio, there is the great spread of Neo-ostoicism.

2) Between 1 670 and 1690, the parenetic ethics of the great moralists dominated the scene: Balthasar Gracian, Pasca!, La Rochefoucauld.

3) A century later, in Germany, there is Kant with his critique of practical reason and, in England, Bentham with his utilitarian calculations. In France, the most conspicuous thematisation of virtue and vice, in their mirror-image opposition and their effects, is entrusted to the dissolute pen of the Marquis de Sade.

4) The next wave arrived regularly around 1880, when with Simmel and Neo-Kantism came the flowering of value philosophies.

What about our century? We have even anticipated this periodic revival. From the 1960s onwards, we have witnessed a resurgence in the demand for ethics and a corresponding efflorescence of theories that aim to satisfy it.

How to interpret this phenomenon? As the manifestation of a historical rhythm in the life of modern culture? Or as the expression of a critical awareness and philosophical health? Or perhaps as a sign of a reaction to the crisis and a will to overcome it?

Let us gladly leave the interpretation of these periodic returns to the astrologers and simply note that the panorama of contemporary ethical theories offers a babelic spectacle. Confusion reigns supreme in the tradition of continental thought, ranging from the 'neo-Aristotelianism' of Gadamer to the 'ethics of argumentation' of Habermas and Apel to the 'ethics of responsibility' of Hans Jonas, and in the field of Anglo-American discussion, where we move from utilitarianism to meta-ethics, from neo-contractualism to communitarianism, from bioethics to environmental ethics. The catalogue of ideas is sva-

and the curious tourist could stroll endlessly through the ethics market garden.

The reality is that today, to an extent aggravated by the nihilistic framework and the planetary and complex nature of modern life, the crisis that has marked other historical epochs is being repeated and is characterised by the conflict between worldviews and systems of differing standards, by the difficulty of framing new moral actions and facts within traditional ethical paradigms, by the competition between different ethical theories that generates logomachies with neither winners nor losers and results in indifference, relativism and scepticism.

Things are no better on a practical level. The binding force of moral standards and the possibility of their being accepted and applied have vanished. Here too it must be noted: *Pa radigm lost.* Traditional references – myths, gods, transcendences, values – have been eroded by the disenchantment of the world. Scientific-technical rationalisation has produced the undecidability of ultimate choices on the level of reason alone. The result is the polytheism of values and the isoste ny of decisions, the same stupidity of prescriptions and the same inu tility of prohibitions. In the world governed by science and technology, the effectiveness of moral imperatives seems to be equal to that of bicycle brakes mounted on a jumbo jet (Beck, 1988: 1 94). Under the steel canopy of nihilism, there is no virtue or morality possible.

The fact is that the lost paradigm has been replaced by a new one that imposes its own imperatives on all human conduct and behaviour.

no. It is the techno-scientific paradigm. Science and technology - which coring space and speeding up time, relieving pain and prolonging life, mobilising and exploiting the planet's resources – they provide a far more effective and coercive guide to action than morality can. They impose obligations that bind more than all morals written in the history of mankind, making all other imperatives superfluous from now on. Science and technology organise life on the planet with the inevitability of a geological shift. In their sight, ethics and morality now have the beauty of rare fossils.

Contemporary man has no alternative: whatever he thinks or does, he is already subject to the coercion of 'technoscience'. Despite this, he still lulls himself in the uplifting attitude of traditional humanism and its ideals, which, however, appear powerless in the face of the reality of technoscience and which produce, at best, an e vation and compensation. There are those who think – like Heidegger – that what is disturbing today is not the fact that the world will become completely technocratic, but that man is not prepared for this transformation of the

world. Those who linger on thinking in terms of morals and ethics are not yet up to the challenge of technoscience. To those who asked him why, after *Being and Time*, he had not yet written an ethics, Hei degger replied that an ethics appropriate to the problems of the modern world already lies in understanding the essence of technology. Any ethics – conceived to the measure of the individual – would be inadequate for the planetary macro-action of mankind, it would remain something 'pe nultimate' to the ultimate realities produced by technoscience. In the age dominated by nihilism, ethics remain on the level of homiletics.

The question that arises at this point is whether nihilism is indeed – as Heidegger believed – an inevitable outcome of western rationalism, a sort of essential reversal of the struttive power of rationality born with the Greeks, or whether it is not rather

- as Husserl thought – a betrayal of the original idea of reason, a barbarianisation and impoverishment of that *logos*, which with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had been able to impose itself on the nihilism of a Gorgias. This dilemma has tormented contemporary thought - as witnessed by the controversy over the 'total critique of reason' between two of its leading exponents, Apel and Derrida - and, if it can ever be resolved, to do so requires a historical stance that we have not yet matured.

The days when Talleyrand said that to establish something lasting one must act according to a principle are not too distant: with a principle we are strong and meet no resistance. But we know – thanks to this diplomat capable of serving so many sovereigns and sooner or later betraying them all, thanks to this chameleon-like prince capable of wearing the clothes of the *Ancien Régime* on the skin of the modern individual and reconciling Christian virtues and secularism, moral principles and political realism – that this declaration conceals its exact opposite and that declarations of principles today mask the absence of principles. *Principes, c'est bien.' Cela n'engage point.* The figure of Talleyrand, with his fidelity to the maxim *larvatus prodeo,* shows how nihilism has become reality (cf. Calasso, 1983).

But, one wonders, if it is true that nihilism begins where there is the will to self-deception, can we then turn our experience of it into a lesson, or rather a vigorous invitation to clear thinking and radical questioning – at a time when abandoned altars are inhabited by demons?

Jean Dubuffet wrote that 'only nihilism is constructive' because it is 'the only path that leads man to establish himself in the chime ra' (Dubuffet, 1969:80). The provocation of this artist and theorist

of the avant-garde, even without being shared, helps us to see that ni chilism has indeed taught us a corrosive and disturbing yet profound and consistent lesson.

It has taught us that we no longer have a private perspective - not religion nor myth, not art nor metaphysics, not politics nor morality, not even science – capable of speaking for all
the others, that we no longer have an Archimedean point on which we could again name the whole. This is the deeper meaning of the negative terminology - 'loss of the centre',
"devaluation of values", "crisis of meaning" – which nihilism has made flourish and which evidently expresses the *crisis of self-description* of our time. Nihilism has given us the awareness that we moderns are rootless, that we are navigating by sight in the archipelagos of life, of the world, of history: because in disenchantment, there is no longer a compass to guide us; there are no longer any routes, paths, previous measurements that can be used, or pre-established destinations to land on.

Nihilism has corroded truths and weakened religions; but it has also dissolved dogmatisms and brought down ideologies, thus teaching us to maintain that *reasonable prudence of* thought, that paradigm of oblique and cautious thinking, which enables us to navigate by sight among the rocks of the sea of precariousness, in the crossing of becoming, in the transition from one culture to another, in the negotiation between one group of interests and another. After the fall of transcendences and the entry into the modern world of technology and the masses, after the corruptio n of the realm of legitimacy and the transition to that of convention, the only recommended course of action is to work with conventions without believing in them too much, the only non- naive attitude is the renunciation of an ideological and moral overdetermination of our behaviour. Ours is a philosophy of Penelope who unravels *(analyei)* her web inces santly because she does not know whether Ulysses will return.

For we still do not know when we could say of ourselves what Nietzsche dared to think of himself when he claimed to be
"the first perfect nihilist of Europe, who, however, has already experienced nihilism itself to the core – who has it behind him, under him, outside him)) (VIII, n, 393 ).

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